

*England's richest men
were dying—*

always by accident, always without a suspicion of murder. But—someone always stood to gain by their deaths!

Scotland Yard was worried. It had suspicions, but nothing more. Then Inspector Heppel called on Lucien Clay, the red-bearded portrait painter who put too much of his sitters' real character into their portraits to secure many commissions. And Lucien Clay, from one clue and another, came to learn of a strange cult—the New Seekers, with a High Priest whose rich voice had been heard, but whose face had never been seen. Lucien joined the cult, and found it the resort of wealthy profligates—neurotics, dypsomaniacs, drug addicts.

Among other things, the curious word "anathoth," led him to a trail of passion, murder, and fiendish cleverness pointing straight to the most ruthless killer in England.

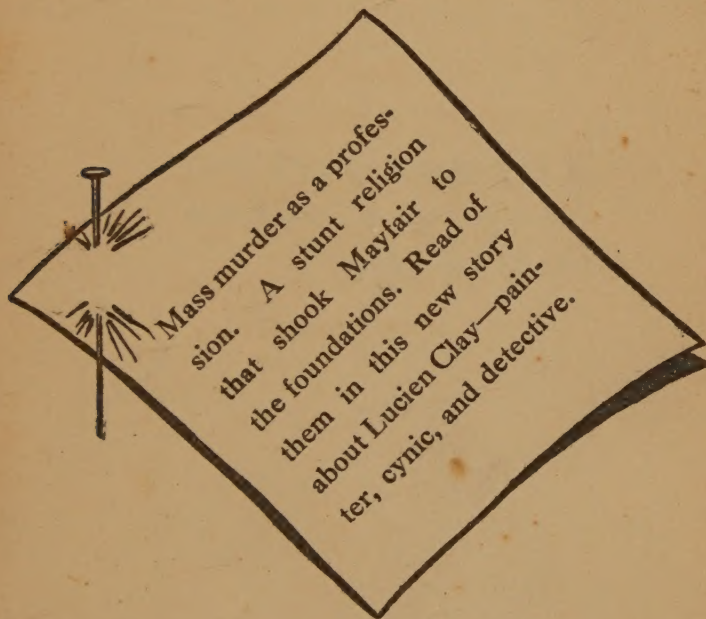
BY WAY OF CONFESSION

Books by
ROBERT GORE BROWNE

BY WAY OF CONFESSION
AN IMPERFECT LOVER
IN SEARCH OF A VILLAIN
THE CRATER

BY WAY OF CONFESSION

BY ROBERT GORE BROWNE



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FIRST EDITION

*Come Violent Death; serve for
mandragora to make me sleep.*

JOHN WEBSTER.

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. BY WAY OF CONFESSION

PROLOGUE

The Cathedral in Park Lane

AN OLD man in a jade green cassock leaned his weight on the great doors of bronze. They turned on well-oiled pivots to release a burst of sound, perfume, and light on the fogbound street. From the foot of the steps, where the lamps of motor cars hung in the air like vague, luminous balloons, came the *whirr* of engines starting. Invisible chauffeurs knew that their vigil at the doors of the great cathedral in Park Lane was over.

Already the vanguard of the congregation stood silhouetted in the lighted archway. Women with cunning little hats and sleek, voluminous furs, men with high-waisted overcoats and neatly rolled umbrellas peered ruefully into the fog. The crowd thickened. But no one spoke. They were under the spell of a religion that had been made for them in their own image. Their senses were subjugated by the heart throb of the great organ, now swelling into a rapture, now swooning into an ecstasy; by the heavy fragrance of resins and gums that rolled from urns of alabaster. Their eyes had been wooed by processions with dancing lights and kaleidoscopic vestments. Their

nerves had been assaulted by an alternation of deep silences and bursts of titanic harmony, of blank darkness and brilliant illumination. Their intellects were dominated by a preached—"The Guide," this sect of New Seekers had learned to call him—with a voice like a silver gong, the hands of a Spanish cardinal, and the subtle mind of a mediæval metaphysician.

"Life," the lovely metallic accents had insinuated, "has no beauty, has no shape without happiness. A happy face, a happy landscape, a happy child is beautiful. To add to the world's store of happiness is a right to which you, my brothers and sisters, are born, a duty which you may not shirk. Do you ask how to attain this happiness which is your heritage? I answer that it is by fulfilling yourselves, by developing your personalities, by following your duty to yourselves. . . ."

For ten minutes with elegance and point he had embroidered this easily accepted theme. As his last words died away, from behind a grille of ivory came the voices of singing boys. Their anthem mounted to the painted roof, swooped to the mosaic pavement, beat like a bird against the glass of jewelled windows.

Silence for a full minute supervened. Then the Leader spoke.

No layman, it was said, had ever seen the founder of the New Search movement. His voice they heard filling the sanctuary. A glimpse of his shadow they sometimes caught through the silver filigree

work, when the black velvet curtains were drawn back. But not even the Initiates claimed to have seen his face.

And now he spoke the valediction. The low, clear voice, that a famous actress had compared to the sound of the sleeping sea, echoed through the great cathedral, echoed in the hearts of the crowded congregation.

"Go forth!" it said. *"Go forth, Seekers after happiness and light! Though the end of your search be not in sight, have patience, for at last you shall attain fulfilment of the Heart's Desire."*

His words still rang in the ears of the ever-growing group of worshippers that lingered in the doorway, reluctant to face the fog. At last the pressure of their fellows forced them out in blurred clusters on the shallow steps.

The emotions aroused during the last hour were passed in review. A handsome woman of forty with a dark green hat drawn down on her smooth forehead and sables piled on her slim shoulders murmured in the ear of an elderly peer. His eyes were disillusioned and his mouth petulant.

"Every time I come," she was saying, "I go away a happier woman. I feel *soothed!*"

"Soothed!" repeated the man. "That's just the word. They let one see a purpose in life."

On the next step a revue queen smeared her mouth with lipstick. The two guardsmen who escorted her exchanged views.

"Wonderful show!" exclaimed the younger.
"They get you all worked up!"

His friend nodded.

"First time I've been. I never knew religion meant that."

The actress replaced the tube of red in her gold-meshed bag.

"*Self-expression*," she breathed reverently.

Below, the cars bore off their irreplaceable freights. Their passage set the fog swirling. From the distance a sound of shouting pierced the rumble of the exhausts.

"The Guide has promised to dine with us on Tuesday," the woman owner of a famous race horse confided to her lover.

The shouting came nearer. The words were indistinguishable, but not the ill-omened nature of the cry.

"What sensation brings newspaper boys to Park Lane?" demanded a King's Counsel, who may have felt that he had earned first refusal of the front page.

"Nothing was happening when I left the House," added a member of the Government.

By now the listeners could catch the sense of the shout.

"*Another mysterious death!*" called a newsboy.

"*Mysterious death!*" The words were flung like an echo from the cliff-like cathedral. A second newsboy had stolen on the group from behind.

"Another!" The word passed from lip to lip. Eye caught eye and looked away. Furs were held closer

round white throats. A man in an astrachan collar cursed his chauffeur for a recalcitrant carburettor.

"Who is it this time?" The divorcée of the minute looked pale under her paint.

A poster slung across the stomach of the newsboy gleamed faintly through the fog. The lettering confirmed his claim.

ANOTHER UNEXPLAINED DEATH!

Hands held out pennies.

"Why isn't something done?" An octogenarian duke was fumbling with his glove. Sheffield Webster, who had three plays running in the West End, turned his head.

"All the victims are rich and prominent men. The Chancellor of the Exchequer needs money. Since death duties are paid, need the Government care?"

No one laughed. A High Court judge said gravely: "Over thirty unexplained deaths since the summer!"

The woman in the dark green hat broke in.

"It's Communists! I know it is!"

A political hostess agreed. Her voice was shrill with fear and indignation.

"Those dreadful people! Why don't the police do something? Every Communist ought to be deported!"

"Hung!" improved the race-horse owner.

"Whom have they got this time?" asked a man in a top hat.

The K. C. looked up from his paper.

"Sir Robert Bynion," he said quietly. "He was found dead in his garden in Hampshire!"

"Good God! I lunched with him last week!" The proprietor of several newspapers had gone green.

There was a little spatter of questions and explanation.

"Another millionaire? . . . The store in Regent Street. . . . Perhaps it was suicide. . . ."

"How was it done?" asked several voices.

The barrister's newspaper rustled as if it were trying to answer. Its purchaser dropped two syllables.

"Poison!"

A sudden silence followed the word. The newspaper magnate who had lunched so recently with the dead man passed a silk handkerchief across dry lips. In a hurry the group began to disperse by car and on foot. Suppose somebody was watching, hidden by the fog, choosing . . . *the next!*

Soon the steps and the pavement were empty. The windows of the cathedral, which had shone through the fog like phosphorescent smears, disappeared. The old man in the jade green cassock leaned his weight against the great bronze doors. There was no sound as they shut.

CHAPTER I

The Girl and the Car

TAXIS eddied like leaves round St. James's Square, missing by inches the shabby man who stood in the middle of the road. He did not look up from the sketchbook in his hand. Abstractedly he scratched his head with a pencil under his hat.

The hat was felt, black, wide brimmed, and circular. It would not have done credit to the bankrupt effects of a defrocked cleric who was careless about dress. The hair, its colour confused with the setting of the October sun, might have sent the proverbial shepherd silly with delight; its condition was enough to drive a self-respecting hairdresser to the river. The pencil was a BBB.

"Rotten!" muttered Lucien Clay and crumpled the top sheet. His mind was off his work. That telephone message from Scotland Yard perplexed him. Was it still too early to go to the meeting place that Superintendent Heppel had appointed?

He fumbled in the pocket of an orange-checked ulster that could not have passed without comment through the incurable ward of a hospital for the aged

blind. The policeman on duty at the corner wished that the razor busy on the blunted pencil had been employed on the hirsute chin.

The artist tested his work on a back-swept thumb stained irremediably with nicotine, stared at the plate glass window across the road, and bent over his sketch.

"Please!" came a soft voice behind him. "I've lost my ticket thing."

Without glancing up, Clay mentioned that it was better to have loved and lost than never to have lost at all.

"My receipt!" the voice persisted. "The thing you gave me."

Impatiently Clay turned his head. The words rose to his bearded lips that he never gave anything to anybody. They were never uttered.

Of his forty years of haphazard life Lucien Clay had wasted few on women. He believed them to be silly, mendacious, and criminally minded. The cleverest woman he had met (he was in the habit of relating) murdered her guardian, and the prettiest lay at Pentonville for blackmailing an archdeacon.

But the girl who had lost her "ticket thing" did not look like a crook. And looks went a long way with Lucien Clay. "Show me the shape of your hands and the set of your lips," the derelict portrait painter used to boast, "and I will show you your soul!"

The mouth that had addressed him was gentle. The hand that held out a shilling was well shaped.

"Do you mind?" its owner murmured. "Would you help me get out my car?"

If the girl, who had mistaken the sketchbook of a once famous portrait painter for the ticket book of an attendant at the car park, had not been tall and slender; if her dark hair had not revolted from the control of her deep red hat; if a narrow strip of mink had not clasped a creamy neck; if high cheek bones and kind eyes had not suggested the Madonnas with whose likeness ikon painters console a suffering world—she would have received blistering enlightenment.

She would have learned that the man she offered a shilling had earned his two thousand pounds for a portrait. She would have heard that though sitters might now refuse to buy the "unfaked studies of their souls" that were produced for their displeasure, they did not dispute the technical skill or power to reveal the human heart in terms of paint and canvas.

She might have been spared a glimpse of the part that a rigid diet of brandy and nicotine had played in the artist's decline, but she would certainly have been vouchsafed a view of the family tree, the tallest, so Clay declared, in Kent. In its middle branches perched in glorious irregularity the royal figure of the second Charles.

Only beauty could have stemmed the tirade. Clay gave the girl a cataloguing glance, swallowed twice, pocketed the tip, and touched the rim of his hat.

"What sort of a car?" he asked in what he considered to be civil tones.

The garden in the centre of the square was ringed with motors of every make, colour, age, and shape. Together the incongruous pair tracked down a blue saloon of the most costly English manufacture.

The distant sight of a shabby back bowed over a packet of sandwiches jabbed Clay's dormant conscience.

"You ought to give up the receipt," he reminded the girl.

"I tell you I've lost it!"

"That's not my fault."

She gazed at him with eyes like a beautiful heifer's.

"Couldn't you write another?"

A glimpse of the sketchbook drew a kindly smile.

"That's not bad!"

Clay grinned.

"Truly! I mean you really ought to persevere. I know a man who would give half a guinea for that!"

"So do I." Clay's grin broadened. "You see it's worth thirty."

She coloured and frowned. She was not used to having her mistakes remarked.

"You're a professional artist, I suppose? And all this—" her glance at the ginger ulster and the deplorable hat brought them perceptibly nearer the rag bag—"is a pose to make you interesting to the public? I think it's contemptible!"

Her straight nose was elevated as she climbed

into her car. Hand on self-starter, she spoke without regarding the wreckage of the painter. "Kindly tell me if my mudguard is clear of that Buick."

Clay stepped back and cocked his head. Perhaps he had deserved what he got. Wise men don't make fun of young women. His long white finger, extended to waggle the car clear of its berth, suddenly stiffened. An exclamation stuck in his throat, and the sketch-book spread-eagled on the muddy road. His keen blue eyes were riveted to the front wheel. With a bound he landed on the step. His long arm shot through the open window and pulled the girl's fingers from the gear lever.

"What's wrong?" she asked, so coolly that he stepped back.

"Nothing—if you like running on three wheels!"

A little frown wrinkled the pure forehead that was pushed through the window.

"Three nuts out of the four that hold the front wheel to the axle," Clay said slowly—"missing!"

"They can't be!" The big eyes were indignant. "Wills wouldn't send me out like that. He knows I drive fast."

"Your next drive will be at the walking pace of four black horses," Clay observed grimly.

The girl took a long time to climb out of the saloon. She stared at the front wheel.

"What an extraordinary thing!" she said stupidly.

"Murder is extraordinary. Or used to be!"

"Murder! Don't be idiotic!" She felt immediate contrition for the sharpness of her voice that inexplicably seemed to be out of control. "Don't look so angry about it, *please!* It was a beastly thing to do. But they may have meant no harm. People have no imagination."

Clay shrugged his shoulders. He agreed that the "beastliest things" are done by "people who have no imagination." All day long his mind had been occupied with murder. Had that become an obsession?

"Possibly," he conceded. "But the man who borrowed those nuts set no sentimental value on human life. The three would have cost a shilling."

"There's something about cars" —the girl was talking to recover her calm—"that brings out the worst in human nature. A driver with a trade number in Great Portland Street fairly gibbered at me. Just because I had to brake rather hard!"

"We must never forget," the painter reminded her gravely, "that even motor traders are God's creatures!"

She laughed and showed teeth that would have stripped the years from the back of a dentifrice king. But Clay's attention had been caught by something that flashed even more dazzlingly. A small bow of brilliants, such as many women wear, was pinned in the brim of her deep red hat. In its centre was a stone such as many women dream of. Clay eyed it thoughtfully.

"I suppose," the girl was saying, "I ought to tell the police."

"Tell your grandmother!" snapped Clay. "At least she won't write it in a little book."

"I haven't got a grandmother."

"I was afraid not." The artist's eyes were troubled. "Tell me, who gave you that brooch?"

"I bought it," said the girl shortly.

"So I feared. What is your name?"

She hesitated.

"Hope Moreland."

"Hope Moreland?" repeated the artist. "I know that name."

"When Father died, I inherited half a million." She spoke apologetically. "The newspapers were short of copy. 'Fortune for Flapper' was the way they put it!"

She broke off. The red beard was jerked in her face.

"Why are you staring?"

Clay's eyes were serious.

"You're one of the Blood-sucking Rich?"

She laughed.

"I can't help it! I give away as much as the trustees will let me."

"I am no longer in doubt"—he gave his hat a truculent tilt—"about those nuts!"

"What d'you mean?"

The answer was sinister enough.

"Rich men are dying at the rate of two a week. A second lieutenant lasted longer in 1914 than a millionaire in 1930."

The girl shivered.

"You don't think——?"

"A front wheel off at forty, and the accident would again be—unexplained."

Hope's decent heart revolted.

"No one could be so vile!"

Clay chuckled.

"That's what fifteen or sixteen brace of rich men said their last mornings. They may know better now!" He became serious. "Have you noticed anybody following you?"

She shook her head.

"No one—" she hesitated—"unless . . ."

"Unless who?" the painter insisted.

"There's absolutely nothing to connect him with this—this business. But there does happen to be a man who always seems hanging about the hotel where I am staying."

"And you hoped it was just sex appeal!"

She did not appear to have heard. She had first noticed the young man, she said, when she was signing the visitors' book. He was tall and she thought he looked nice. But he stared until she was embarrassed. Since that day she had often found him in corridors, in the lift, at the next table. He made no attempt to speak, but she felt he was watching her. And now this had happened. . . .

"I can't believe it!" she broke off. "He might follow me. But cold-blooded murder!"

The painter's answer was a familiar quotation.

"Alas, regardless of their doom,
The little victims play!
No sense had they of ills to come,
Or care beyond the . . . financial columns of the paper."

He was fumbling in the tool box of the car. His search for nuts to fit the denuded bolts was ultimately successful.

"It's safer in these days," he remarked as the brace rotated, "to be poor like me."

Hope's voice was kind.

"Are you very poor?"

"Ready money," euphemized the artist, "is a complication. Painting materials are dear. So is brandy!"

She sympathized. She knew that pictures were hard to sell since the war.

"Mine," said Clay frankly, "are impossible! The aldermen, company promoters, and professional beauties who buy portraits of themselves refuse to be shown their true likenesses. It smacks too strongly of the farmyard, penitentiary, zoological garden, or streets."

He cocked his head to examine his work with the brace. The result seemed to satisfy him. He shut the tool box.

"That is why"—he jerked his beard at the tall

building across the road—"I keep my hand in on the types I can watch at club windows."

He picked up the sketchbook from the road and wiped it with the corner of his tie.

"Lord ——"—the name was famous throughout the empire for the successful administration of bucket shops—"was standing at that window across the road. He needed a north light to pick his teeth. The Senior Universities, is it? I should have doubted whether Borstal counted!"

He held the sketchbook before Hope's eyes. She gazed doubtfully. For if the boldly executed sketch was the living image of the financier, it was also an unflattering likeness of a successful wolf. Every stroke suggested lean, watchful rapacity. The drawing was more than a caricature. Its author knew the meaning of every line and wrinkle, the significance of each sag and pouch. The scrawl of the BBB pencil had laid a soul bare.

Hope felt his eyes fixed on her face.

"D'you know," she heard him say, "I'd like to paint you."

She closed the sketchbook quickly.

"It wasn't wise to show me what you do to your sitters."

Clay's cold blue stare plumbed her mind.

"You would have nothing to fear!"

She hedged.

"In the meantime, can I drop you?"

The painter hoisted his lank body into the saloon.

Arms and legs seemed to stick out of the ulster at irregular intervals.

"The Natural History Museum!" he commanded.

Hope's thumb again sought the button of the self-starter.

"Stuffed animals are so depressing!"

He went to the museum to meet a detective, he explained. She thought the rendezvous odd.

"Why?" asked the painter. "Art galleries and museums are only useful for loitering. That is why they are frequented by school children, police detectives, and engaged couples."

Hope was not listening. Her head was turned, and she stared through the window in the back of the car.

"Look!" she whispered. "That's him!"

Clay did not like to be interrupted.

"Who?" His voice was irritable.

"The tall man! The man who has been following me!"

"Start the car!" Clay commanded. "Give me the excuse of looking round to guide you out."

The engine hummed. Clay's wild head was poked out of the window. All he could see of the watcher was a pair of massive tweed-clad shoulders, half-hidden by the row of cars.

"He saw you look!" Clay scolded. "He's turned his back."

The shoulders vanished behind a coupé. The painter caught a glimpse of a strong neck and a soft felt hat.

"Why does he follow me?" breathed Hope.

Clay's insensitive heart was touched by the appeal of fingers that clutched his sleeve.

"We'll beat him," he promised, "if his pockets are full of wheel nuts!"

Hope jammed the lever into second gear. The car leaped forward.

"It's frightening me!" she cried.

As they skidded the corner Clay looked behind. A man in the soft felt hat had left the shelter of the coupé and was craning his neck. Clay settled back into his seat.

"If you had not been in such a hurry," he complained, "I would have seen his face."

"What's the good of that?" The girl's nerves were jangled.

"I could have advised you about life insurance!"

CHAPTER II

Clay on Crime

THE inevitable block by the Ritz Hotel gave Clay his chance to study the girl's face. Her beauty made his fingers itch for the palette. Of course she must sit to him!

"When will you come to tea?" he assumed. "Or do you only drink Martinis?"

"I've never tasted a cocktail," was the honest answer.

"Then you're not modern?"

She raised her arched eyebrows.

"I don't quite know what you mean."

The constable on duty released the westward stream of traffic. Hope's car started with a jerk, bumping the corner of an island. Something rattled.

"Burlington House!" exclaimed Clay. "Is that my teeth?"

Hope giggled.

"My money box. I put my shillings in when I'm shopping. You see, I save for something."

Clay reviewed the expenses of modern womanhood. Face lifting? Not for another thirty years.

Exploring? She lacked the chin of a sheik fancier. "Channel swim?" he hazarded.

"Are you never serious?" Her voice took a reverent note. "It's for the Young People's Central Fund."

Clay had heard of Bright Young Things.

"Dancing?" he probed. "Treasure hunts?"

The dark eyes were compassionate.

"We don't collect money for anything silly," she remonstrated. "It goes to *useful* objects. Sometimes we hire a gallery to exhibit our work—sculpture or embroidery or whatever our members have created. We also give a certain amount away."

"Bookmakers?" asked Lucien.

"To deserving causes that we want to promote," she corrected primly. "Societies and charities."

The artist made no comment. He was studying the sweet profile. As the car threaded its elaborate way through the traffic, his deep-set eyes, now alert and piercing, now remote and withdrawn in contemplation, never left the Madonna features.

The car was sucked into the vortex of Hyde Park Corner. A gust of wind disarranged the dark red hat. A long pennant of dark hair blew out. The artist threw back his head, and his pointed beard, shaken by his laughter, waggled an admonitory finger at heaven.

"You are amused?" Hope's voice was frigid. She raised both hands to tuck away the strand of hair, and her car described a figure of eight between two buses.

"Not at you!" Clay assured her. "The bishop!"

"What bishop?"

"Any bishop. They all stock the same patter. The modern miss. Her skirts, her language, her lipstick, her cocktails. And all the time the barman is strewing lilies on her grave. I tell you I'm going straight home to write to *The Times*. '*The modern girl. The unhealthiness of her unshingled hair. Are her long skirts provocative? Can she hold her liquor? . . .*'"

Hope interrupted to ask where the painter had been studying the new woman.

"In you," was the emphatic reply. "You are the only one I've met, but I know you're HER!"

Hope was not sure whether this was complimentary. She knew it was ungrammatical.

"Of course," continued Clay, "you were bound to come! How damned funny! I suppose you're about eighteen?"

"Nineteen," she corrected.

"And twenty-four seems old?"

Hope gave the question her consideration.

"Not old," she decided, "but of course no longer very young."

"You wouldn't like to look twenty-four?"

"Oh, no!" This time there was no hesitation.

Clay blinked as the saloon rubbed the paint off a bus.

"That's why you don't want short skirts or shingled hair. And cocktails seem to you rather a mature

taste. You probably confuse the habit with snuff taking?"

Hope giggled absently. She was not sure what the man was talking about.

"And that," he continued, "brings me back to my question. When will you come to tea and let me paint you?"

Hope answered serenely that she would have to bring her aunt.

"Chaperons!" murmured Clay. "Isn't that 'period'! But why your aunt?"

Hope explained. Aunt Mina was her only living relation. For some reason the painter pondered her answer.

"If I hadn't noticed the absence of those nuts," he asked with his eyes on hers, "Aunt Mina would be half a million to the good?"

Hope's slim shoulders shivered under her fur.

"I suppose she would." The intensity of the artist's gaze emphasized the meaning of his words. Her lips trembled. "But you don't suggest——"

"Why not?" asked Clay bluntly.

"Why not?" repeated Hope. Her gentle voice rose a note. "Because she's a perfect dear! I call it horrible of you."

"Has your lady aunt not failings?" Clay's voice was very smooth.

"Janet Westhaven says she's worldly." The modern girl was conscientious. "She isn't really. She's awfully kind. Goes to church a lot."

"There you are!" Clay kicked the dashboard. "Suppose she's a pillar of the parochial council! Does that prove those wheel nuts aren't under her has-sock?"

"They aren't and she isn't!" Hope was quite red. "She's a New Seeker. She left the Church of England as a girl."

"New Search!" echoed Clay. "The great revival the papers are full of?"

Hope nodded. She had gone with her aunt to the cathedral in Park Lane. To be honest, she found the teaching rather materialistic. But Mrs. White claimed a daily spiritual uplift.

Clay was not listening.

"You're as bad as a Scotland Yard detective," he accused his surprised companion. "You can't tell the difference between character and circumstance."

Hope asked him to say it again slowly.

"Because," he elucidated, "a man is a churchwarden, or a judge, or a public-school boy, or a soldier, you assume him innocent."

Hope had the hardihood to suggest there was something to be said for the prejudice.

"Everything!" agreed the painter, and added: "By the undetected criminal!"

He rolled himself a limp cigarette.

"When the common cutthroat of the slums wants an alibi, he pins his faith to dimensions of time and space. The assassin of Mayfair is better served by the *bona fides* of blue blood or bank balance."

Hope knew how to handle men mounted on their hobbies.

"Yes, isn't he?" she agreed brightly.

"If Scotland Yard would throw away their lenses and callipers and look at crime through the eye of the portrait painter——"

Hope left the traffic to take care of itself and gazed encouragingly into the lecturer's face.

"Yes?" she breathed.

"They would learn that, in spite of every provocation, a widow with thumbs and ears of a certain shape could not put hyoscine in her husband's port; that the lines round the mouth of an eminent K. C. might explain the disappearance of a blackmailing solicitor; that the shape of a certain reverend, tonsured head may be the key to an outbreak of anonymous letter writing; that the width between a pair of much photographed blue eyes——"

"You can tell a criminal by his face?"

The theory appealed to a depository of feminine intuition.

"Better than you can tell an innocent man by his walk in life. How many butchers have held the rank of field marshal? How many cabinet ministers have drunk themselves to death? How many asylums could be filled with sadistic judges?"

Women mistrust eloquence.

"You wouldn't hang a man on the shape of his head?"

Clay chewed his straggling beard.

"And they allow women souls, votes, and minds!" Hope hastened to repair her error.

"Please don't be angry! I was just going to make a suggestion."

Clay waited. They were ranging the sombre gentility of the Cromwell Road. The pure Victorian-Hammam of the Natural History Museum crenelated the horizon.

"You believe that my aunt is capable of——" A gesture supplied what words refused. "*I know* she couldn't. I'd like you to know too. I'm dining at her flat to-night. Come too——"

Clay did not wait for the sentence to finish.

"What time?" he demanded. "And where?"

She told him.

"You might mention I like brandy better than wine," he insinuated.

Hope sighed.

"You're so clever," she said softly. "You're a great painter. You've got the most marvellous ideas about crime. Couldn't you give up brandy and *do* something?"

She pulled up the car at the gates of the Natural History Museum and turned her beautiful eyes to the artist's ravaged face. The pleading in them had a baneful effect on his discretion.

"Do something!" he echoed. "I like that! Do you know why I'm going to that morgue?"

She shook her head.

"To tell Superintendent Heppel of the C. I. D.

how to find the man who has murdered thirty millionaires since August!"

For a full minute he stood gazing after the blue saloon and the dark red hat that he could just see through the rear window.

CHAPTER III

Painter and Policeman

THE lofty hall of the museum was dark and a little depressing. Even stuffed heads of elephants and marble busts of Sir Richard Owen failed to brighten it. The stocky figure in the tight serge suit standing before a glass case embowering the cast of a wood-boring beetle seventy times as large as life seemed affected by the general gloom.

"See those jaws, Mr. Clay?" said Superintendent Heppel. "The card says they'll bite through lead. What wouldn't our safe-smashing friends give for that dentition?"

"Did you bring me here to look at a blasted beetle?" snarled Lucien.

"Wonderful thing, Nature!" The C. I. D. man led his irritable friend to another case. "Protective colouring. Look at that butterfly. You can hardly see it against the bit of bark."

"I don't want to," growled the artist.

"That's what we're up against." The detective did not seem to hear. "Somewhere among the forty million innocent people of this country, looking and act-

ing like an innocent man, sits a murderer. *He* can see us. We can't see him. Just like that moth. That's why I fixed to meet you here. He seems to know what goes on at the Yard."

"Does anything?" asked Clay kindly.

Heppel ignored the attack.

"The only time he shows is when he kills. He kills without warning, motive, pity. He never leaves a clue."

The painter looked curiously at the commonplace features of his friend. A square hand was fiddling with the watch chain that spanned the blue serge waistcoat.

"Nerves, Superintendent!" he diagnosed. "I didn't know you had any."

Heppel shook a head that was as hard and as hairless as the dinosaur's egg in the next gallery.

"A policeman hasn't room for nerves."

"Or brains!" inserted Clay.

Unmoved, the detective strolled to another case, in which was displayed a reproduction of the rat parasite that spreads bubonic plague.

"That's like our chap!" he said. "About as quick, as quiet, and as fatal. Thirty-six deaths since August. All rich or prominent men. Coroners' verdicts of suicide or accidental death. I know better. Murder. But who——"

An elderly nonconformist divine with a baggy umbrella and a white tie paused to admire the works of the Lord as exemplified under the glass.

"Might be him!" remarked Heppel, and led his companion to the prehistoric room.

"Lord Woolmouth dead in his bath!" Heppel ticked off the fatalities on his stubby fingers. "Alfred Moore, the chief Whip, in a locked railway carriage, with a revolver in his hand and a bullet through his brain. Baroness Van Eycken's Rolls through a wall on the Portsmouth road, its owner's and chauffeur's necks broken. Sir Otto Weymann unconscious in the orchid house at Kew and dead before they got him home——"

Clay's gaze wandered round the gigantic skeletons that followed in Indian file down the middle of the dark gallery.

"Those dominated this planet," he mused, "until Evolution closed their overdrawn account. What if the same force has laid her hand on the throat of our modern colossi?"

Heppel tilted the bowler hat on his bald head.

"You agree with the newspapers?" he asked. "The Communists?"

The painter remarked that he rarely read the newspapers. Was there any evidence against the Communists?

The man from Scotland Yard cleared his throat.

"That's where we wanted your help, Mr. Clay. You have a lot of queer friends. Sometimes you hear things that don't reach the Yard."

Lucien tugged an indignant beard.

"I have no queer friends!" he retorted. "I have the

eye and the brain of a painter. A great portrait painter. That is why I can put the police right."

"Did you ever meet Sir Robert Bynion?" Heppel was pursuing his own train of thought.

The artist shook his flaming head.

"The man who has just died?"

"The man who has just been murdered," corrected the detective gravely. "The millionaire owner of the *Galérie Mondaine* in Regent Street. Opposite Curlew & Blackett."

Clay stared without enthusiasm through the glass of a cupboard filled with fossilized sponges. He asked for the established facts.

"A policeman," he remarked, "fills himself with facts, like a schoolboy with green apples. Neither can digest his feast."

Superintendent Heppel did not at once answer. He was marshalling in his methodical mind the circumstances of the death of the draper millionaire.

Sir Robert, Clay in due course learned, spent most of the year at his country house in Hampshire. In his later middle age, slugs and aphides had displaced pounds and pence as his favourite quarry. When he was not gardening he passed his time composing letters to the press or taking camera studies of nature. These minor vices apart, he was as harmless an old gentleman as a millionaire can be. After his death the closest scrutiny of his papers failed to disclose the existence of personal enemies, financial worries, or affairs of the heart.

Sir Robert's last day began with the usual blameless activity. A letter to *The Times* was drafted that settled the modern undergraduate and his habits of work and play. A saddle of mutton, a pint of Chambertin, Stilton cheese, and a glass of port crowned this labour. Half an hour of slumber, and as the autumn day was fair the old man pottered about the grounds with his camera. Outside what was known as the Garden Room, a self-contained building where Sir Robert kept a dry pair of shoes, his photographic and gardening gear, and a croquet set, he found Mackenzie sweeping leaves. Mackenzie was one of the detectives whose temporary duty was to watch over the safety of the threatened millionaires of England. Accepting his apparent rôle, the old man discussed last night's frost and its effect on the dahlias. Shaking his head over the English climate, he disappeared into the Garden Room. Mackenzie continued to sweep the leaves and never let the single door and window of that building out of his sight. Twenty minutes later the butler brought a telegram from a firm of London stockbrokers. The successful conclusion of a deal in Imperial Silvers was a matter of indifference to the old gentleman, whose livid face was turned to the ceiling.

The superintendent frowned his bewilderment at the skeleton of the Giant Sloth. The vast eye sockets of the extinct edentate stared back in mournful perplexity.

No one was staying at Longbarrow, Heppel pro-

ceeded to inform the artist and the megatherium. The servants all bore impeccable characters. No stranger had been seen in the neighbourhood of the house. The county police were promptly summoned and with Mackenzie's help made a minute examination of the Garden Room. Except Sir Robert's own, no fingerprints or footprints were found. The door and window were shut, the furniture in its usual order. The only occupant of the room lay stone dead with his camera beside him.

"Cause of death?" demanded Clay.

"Cyanide of potassium." Heppel pursed his lips. "Not a big dose, but enough to settle an old man in a few minutes."

"Where did the poison come from?"

On the fifteenth of August Sir Robert had bought from the chemist in the village a packet of the stuff to destroy wasps' nests. He had signed the poison book and had deplored the inroads the insects were making on his fruit. The remains of this packet were found in the room.

Superintendent Heppel judged a pause, before he finished off his story.

"In the absence of any trace of outside interference or of the slightest motive for suicide, the coroner's jury brought in a verdict of accidental death." He turned from the gigantic fossil and looked at his friend.

"What do you think, Mr. Clay?"

The artist had removed his disreputable hat and

was running his fingers through his fine, tangled hair.

"A hard-headed old draper without a care in the world doesn't eat cyanide of potassium by accident, Superintendent," he remarked.

A silence fell between the two men. Clay led the way into another gallery.

"*Cui bono?*" he asked of a stuffed dogfish suspended from the ceiling.

"A little after four," hazarded the equally puzzled detective.

"I asked, who gets the boodle?" Clay translated.

The mouth of the little man in the blue serge suit gathered in disapproval. The same expression was permanent on the face of the dogfish.

"Mr. Claud Bynion, Sir Robert's only son, is the heir."

"Well, then!" The red beard tickled the detective's ear. "Forget about your Communists! Some sons would do a good deal for a million."

"We are aware of that at the Yard," Heppel answered mildly. "We made a few inquiries. Mr. Claud's bank balance is a bit rocky. He bets on horses. There was a breach-of-promise action that came rather expensive."

The C. I. D. man shook his head mournfully.

"At the time of his father's death," he sighed, "Mr. Claud was rowing in a practice eight at Henley. The seven other oars and the cox spoke to that. There isn't a shadow of evidence to connect him with the—er—accident."

Clay walked up to the cast of *Diplodocus Carnegii*, the lizard that was the Creator's *chef d'œuvre* in the days when size was everything.

"'Eighty-four feet long!'" he read aloud, "and a brain pan the size of a walnut shell. If you stepped on her tail two minutes passed before the fact reached her brain. You ought to get one for the Yard, Superintendent!"

Heppel gave no sign that he had heard.

"All the same," he was speaking to himself, "there's something funny about Mr. Bynion. The day after the inquest he vanished."

"Queer!" admitted Clay. "What's he like?"

"I've been telling you, Mr. Clay," remonstrated Heppel. "None too good a record—gambles, breach of——"

"Blast his morals!" cried Clay. "Leave them to the parsons. What sort of face has the man got?"

The Scotland Yard expert shook a stubby forefinger.

"Those theories of yours, Mr. Clay!"

Lucien warned him that archness went ill with a bowler hat.

"Will those tell you?" Heppel fumbled in a leather wallet.

The artist snatched the couple of snapshots. He scrutinized the first and swore.

"What the devil is the good of that? The fool of a photographer has eliminated every trace of character."

For answer, the detective turned the snapshot on its face.

" 'Height, six foot one,' " read out Lucien. " 'Hair brown. Eyes blue. Features regular.' A pack of policemen's facts that mean nothing!"

"I'm afraid the other will help you less," said Heppel apologetically. "It was taken at a tennis party. It only shows Mr. Bynion's back."

Clay was studying the broad shoulders and the thick neck that the snapshot in his palm depicted. His nostrils quivered.

"I can't tell you where Mr. Claud Bynion is hiding at the moment," he stated. "But an hour and a half ago he was standing in the middle of St. James's Square!"

The policeman did not share the painter's excitement. He pointed out that anyone had the right to stand in the middle of St. James's Square.

"Certainly," agreed Clay. "But not to shadow the most lovely girl I have ever seen."

The little man in the blue serge suit winked at *Diplodocus Carnegii*. Lucien could have vowed that *Diplodocus Carnegii* winked back.

"As long as Mr. Bynion isn't guilty of insulting or annoying behaviour," said Heppel, "I'm afraid we can't help your girl friend!"

"No!" snapped Clay. "But you can help her being murdered in the streets of London!"

CHAPTER IV

Clay's Elegy

THE early dusk had fallen before the painter reached his home in Soho. The dingy façade of the narrow house dropped flakes of discoloured plaster. A group of foreign children with old, unsmiling faces were playing on the unwashed steps, and a curly-haired innocent threw part of a bottle at the artist as he passed. But Clay was too preoccupied to retaliate.

"Get out, you little pest!" he muttered, and felt his way up the unlighted stairs.

The door of the attic in which he lived, slept, ate, and painted stood open, for Lucien did not believe in keys.

Indeed, there was little to lock. The Queen Anne spinet, on which the artist took his meals, would have tumbled to pieces if any optimistic burglar had tried to carry it down the tortuous staircase. The rusty gas stove was clamped to the floor. With every opportunity, no one seemed willing to take as a gift the row of dusty paintings that lined the walls. A heap of empty bottles that filled one corner could only interest a drink-question statistician or a rag-and-bottle man. The pile of books that replaced the

fourth leg of a Louis XIV settee could only quicken the pulse of a criminologist.

Clay must have possessed the gift of vision in the dark to pick his way across that disordered room and between that unstable furniture. Without mishap he reached a three-branched candlestick.

A scrape of a match and yellow light licked the damp-stained ceiling. A ragged hole gaped in the plaster and recorded the point where a chandelier once hung.¹ Two white oblongs glimmered spectrally between floor and skylight, but the painter did not waste a glance on the two canvases he had lately stretched. On the nearer easel a detailed, but it is to be hoped pessimistic, nude of a late Home Secretary had been begun. The virginity of the other oblong had been saved by Heppel's telephonic summons.

Holding aloft the candlestick, Clay rooted in a battered Gladstone bag. Somewhere, he knew, lurked a suit of evening clothes.

A discordant humming sound proceeded through the hair that covered the artist's face. The thought that he would see the Madonna girl at dinner seemed to give him pleasure. Her beauty had got past his cynical defences. The rôle of St. George flatters male vanity. But until the Dragon was dead Clay feared that he must be seldom seen in the Princess's company. Dragons have eyes—notoriously a goodly number—and a Cloak of Invisibility is the best wear for

¹The story of how the fall of that Venetian chandelier saved Lucien Clay's life is told by Mr. Alfred Dale in *In Search of a Villain*.

dragon killers. So Lucien's interest in the murderous conspiracy against Wealth and Beauty must be kept a secret.

Such was his resolution as he scattered the contents of the bag to right and left. He touched bottom and stared round the studio for another hiding place.

This time his glance fell on the second easel. The canvas was no longer blank!

He held the candelabrum to the white surface. Its light fell on a charcoal sketch of a mound of earth. Over the newly dug grave, vindictive relations had raised a broken column and a mourning angel. Across the column was written:

Sacred to the Memory
of
LUCIEN CLAY
who died
SUDDENLY
of minding other people's
business.
Ne sutor ultra crepidam

Clay whistled. The Dragon had drawn first blood. St. George's plan for discreet invisibility was shattered. An unseen quarry stalked the hunter.

The artist threw himself on the Louis XIV settee. It wobbled ominously.

Who had played this bitter joke? Easy enough to slip through the unlatched front door, up the deserted stairs, and into the untenanted room. But who was

aware that Scotland Yard had consulted the painter, or that Hope Moreland had been taken under his protection? Was this the work of the watcher in St. James's Square? Or had some spy tracked Heppel to the museum? The charcoal drawing might give a clue. Skill in delineation and the Latin tag—"Cobbler, stick to your last"—indicated an educated mind and a sardonic humour. Clay's discomfort permitted him a smile and the happy reflection that he was free to see as much of Hope as he liked.

Still chuckling, he turned the drawing on its back. The smile died on his lips and his tobacco-stained teeth chewed at his ragged beard. For on the reverse side of the canvas the mysterious intruder had printed the words:

IT IS SAFER TO BE A BAD PAINTER THAN A GOOD DETECTIVE.

Clay flung the offending frame on the ground.

"If I am a bad painter, my friend," he raged, "I'm a good enough detective to get you hanged!"

CHAPTER V

"All Is Lost! Priests, Priests, Priests!"

—*Dying Words of Henry VIII.*

THE Honourable Mrs. White, whose character the suspicious artist was so anxious to probe, occupied a flat that stood where Kensington shades into Knightsbridge.

If she had lived there twenty years earlier she would undoubtedly have ranked among *Punch's* dear old ladies, complete with parrot, knitting, and silly questions. But since "the old order changeth, giving place to new, and God fulfils Himself in many ways," the present year of grace found Clay's hostess with a shingle, an adequate game of bridge, and a shade of rouge to match attenuated skirts. Only the silly questions remained.

The impulse to wring an answer to the Final Question may have accounted for her fine collection of fancy religions.

Born in the bosom of the Established Church, she had passed through an adolescent flirtation with Rome. Incompletely convinced of the infallibility of the Pope, she accepted without a murmur the same trait in Mrs. Annie Besant. Undiluted Buddhism next claimed her, until a misunderstanding with a lama

landed her on her knees in the Albert Hall during the Torry and Alexander revival. The doctrines of Mary Eddy captured her fancy, and ultimately the emphatic gestures and coiffure of Aimée Sempie Macpherson. For the moment New Search held the field, but the recent manœuvres of the Bench of Bishops suggested that for pep and disorder the Church of England need be second to none. A shade of odds was being offered by the knowledgeable that Aunt Mina's wheel would come full cycle.

The dinner to which Clay had been invited was over and the trio had returned to the drawing room.

In Lucien's eyes, evening dress was an elastic term. A brown jacket with velvet lapels was parted by the frill of a soft shirt. A broad tie went twice around his neck and a Byronic collar not quite once. The ladies of the party showed less originality. A cascade of sea-green pleats and flounces flowed outward from Hope Moreland's waist, while her aunt was vivid in a silver and scarlet bridge coat, furred at collar and hem.

"I used to paint as a girl." Aunt Mina prided herself on fitting topic to audience.

Clay stared bleakly into the electric grate, where imitation coal exuded imitation flames.

"Water colour," went on his hostess, "but I painted *in oils* once."

"Indeed!" commented Lucien morosely.

"Yes!" she nodded. "A landscape on a wooden stool. There were some *cows*."

Clay shivered.

"Are you cold, Mr. Clay? Do pull your seat nearer the fire."

Clay tugged obediently but unsuccessfully at a shiny lozenge-shaped block, which the Russian ballet had persuaded Mrs. White was an armchair.

"Don't you *love* that chair, Mr. Clay?" she gushed. "I *hope* you do! It came from dear Ann's shop. You know Lady Ann Fiddle, don't you? You'd *adore* her. George Fiddle gave her pearls to his manicurist, so Ann ran away with her dancing partner. Very high spirited of her, I thought. But she's so jealous of David that he can't get his checks any longer from the old ladies he used to dance with. Dear Ann started the shop—she's *so* artistic!"

Lucien hinted that in an armchair upholstery might take precedence of art. His hostess was not listening.

"Art," she declared, "is the only thing that makes this materialistic life endurable. Don't you think so, Mr. Clay?"

"No!" said the painter. "Drink!"

Mrs. White's vague mouth loosened into a smile. Of course artists *adore* paradoxes. A telephone ringing in the hall came to Clay's rescue.

As soon as the door had closed behind his hostess her niece improved the shining hour.

"I hate cynics!"

For some reason criticism from those chiselled lips stung the Bohemian. He was irritated with himself.

"Bunk!" he retorted. "You're nineteen and chock full of illusions. When you are my age, you'll be glad to find them—where you can."

"Where did you find your illusion that my aunt wanted to murder me? In a brandy bottle?"

Clay was silent.

"You admit you were utterly wrong?"

"I admit I am utterly puzzled," he granted. "But what brain would not be dazed in this room?"

He glanced round him. Mrs. White gave gallant backing to the Hour Glass and the Sickle. From her drawing room, brocade and chintz were banished. Lemon-coloured American cloth took their place. Its unfaltering glaze was repeated in the hard shine of the yellow cellulose ceiling. Hepplewhite and Sheraton had joined Chesterfield and chiffonier in the servants' bedrooms; squat nondescript forms with cock-eyed planes and harsh colouring encumbered the floor.

Clay's mind grappled with the personality of the woman who had furnished this room. He had to admit that there was no evidence of homicidal tendencies in a cult of new wine and new bottles.

"Aren't you abject?" prompted Hope.

Another shudder shook the artist's emaciated frame. He had just seen the reading lamp. It was the love child of the yellow jar from an old-fashioned chemist's window and a fishmonger's bowl of gold-fish. It was topped by a cone of pleated parchment laced with silver cord.

Hope kicked the fender.

"Can't you utter?"

"'Or ever the silver cord be loosed or the golden bowl be broken,' " murmured Clay. "I was hoping that will be soon."

"Completely dippy!" was Hope's diagnosis. "I want to know, do you apologize for what you said about my aunt?"

Clay ruminated.

"I admit she hasn't the build for premeditated murder," he conceded. "That triangular, unvital chin, the recessed area behind the ears . . ."

But Hope had turned her back on the cold-blooded catalogue. She picked up an illustrated paper from the sofa and rustled the pages.

Clay was not abashed.

"Just because she's your aunt she must be innocent! Where's the logic? After all, Crippen was someone's uncle!"

"I think you're perfectly horrid!" Hope did not raise her head from the paper.

Pique made Clay look over her shoulder. The banter died out of his eyes. Without ceremony he snatched the magazine and held the open page close to the offending lamp.

"Let me see!" demanded Hope.

He shook his head. The girl made a grab. Clay slipped the paper behind his back and turned to meet Mrs. White reëntering the room.

"Do you know"—Aunt Mina was full of the news

—"darling Alice's beautiful Alsatian was attacked by a *brute* of a Pekinese? In Sloane Street. I've always said that Pekinese . . ."

She flopped into a chair that the artist with unwonted courtesy had been arranging. Hope made a little face, as the disputed magazine slid under the cushion.

"It's a great mistake"—Aunt Mina was out of breath—"to give so *much* of yourself when people are in trouble. One needs a spiritual reserve!"

Clay leaned forward sympathetically.

"Hope tells me you have a wide religious experience."

Mrs. White nodded.

"You may call it that." Her mind was busy among the creeds that she had sampled and discarded. "But I have found peace and happiness at last!"

"New Search?" Clay's devout pose sat uneasily on the straggling beard and truculent eyebrows. "It is the wish of my life to attend one of your services!"

Hope's eyes were wide with horror. To make fun of her aunt was a shocking abuse of hospitality. Mrs. White fell into the trap.

"What!" she exclaimed. "You've never seen Brother Cosimo? Or heard him preach?"

The floodgates opened and for ten minutes Clay listened to a panegyric of the Guide, as the New Seekers called him.

No one knew who he was or whence he came. One account of his life alleged that he was earning his

thousand dollars a day at Hollywood when the call came. This story was supported by the beauty of his grave face and the grace of his gestures. Others insisted that he was an Austrian or a Russian Grand Duke who had learned in suffering and exile the truths he proclaimed. They found confirmation in his polished manners and a pensive look that sometimes entered his eyes.

He had burst on England two years before. The scene of that immediate triumph had been the red lacquer drawing room of Lady Goodge's house in Berkeley Square.

A dull purple robe, cut like a dalmatic, dropped stiff from cloven chin to sandalled foot. The wave of silver hair, the magnetism of enormous eyes, the exquisite gestures compelled the attention of the group of wealthy *pococuranti* whom curiosity had collected to attend the birth of a new religion. As the periods rolled from the shapely lips indifference gave way to wonder, wonder to enthusiasm.

"What message," asked Clay under his breath, "could touch the hearts of the people I used to paint?"

From a shiny cellulose shelf Mrs. White lifted a volume whose vellum leaves were bound in shagreen. Its title—*The Portal*—was inscribed in letters of silver. She began to read aloud from one of Brother Cosimo's most famous exhortations.

"Of course," Clay whispered to Hope when half a dozen of the vellum pages had been turned, "at

heart everybody hankers after a religion. Only belief in the supernatural makes the natural tolerable. Religions set out to trace the pattern in a tangle."

Hope remarked that many people refuse its consolation. The painter nodded.

"Most creeds demand faith the skeptical mind can't give and sacrifices the sensual body won't give. Brother Cosimo knew better!"

The girl begged him to be quiet. Clay lowered his voice. His hostess read placidly on.

"New Search," he explained, "sets no tax on its proselytes' capacity for faith or works. Their duty, the Guide declaims in glowing phrases, is happiness and self-fulfilment. Mayfair is quite ready to believe that!"

Hope pointedly turned her back. Clay was not discouraged.

"Listen to what she's reading about Prayer," he commanded. "Lake Chad believes that the gods can be coerced by magic. County Galway has got a bit farther. Wheedling may work where magic fails. Mayfair is dubious. It would have its desires accomplished without work, but common sense is skeptical. Along comes Brother Cosimo with a lot of scientific jargon—'the power of auto-suggestion,' 'the inter-relation of mind and matter.' It is fashionable to swallow the pretensions of science, and Mayfair goes to sleep happy that all it asks will be given——"

Mrs. White shut *The Portal* with a snap.

"I thought you said you were interested!"

Hope giggled cruelly.

"I am," Clay vowed. "Deeply. Who worked that out?"

The New Seeker was outraged. She explained that the teaching was inspired.

"Have it your own way!" Lucien sighed. "Who received the inspiration?"

For a moment she did not answer.

"The Leader!"

Her voice was reverent.

"Who's that?"

"The Head of the Church!" Hope volunteered.

"What's his name?"

Mrs. White felt it time to assert herself.

"He has no name." She dropped her voice. "He is the Leader!"

Clay did not wilt.

"Englishman? What does he look like?"

"But *of course* we never see him! He wishes to be regarded as purely spiritual! I think that such a beautiful thought."

Clay did not seem impressed.

"We see his shadow sometimes. And we hear his voice. Oh! what a voice! If you could hear it, Mr. Clay, you would be a different man."

"Thank you!" snapped Clay.

Mrs. White did not notice. A thought had struck her. Thoughts did not very often strike her.

"Isn't it Friday?"

Clay did not know.

"Yes, it *is*. Mr. Clay, you are indeed lucky. There is an Eleventh Hour service to-night. Don't imagine that I want to hurry you away, but you'll find it *most* impressive. Hope dear?"

Hope smiled maliciously.

"You'd better take Mr. Clay," she suggested. "And see that he sits it out!"

Mrs. White set her feet firmly on the fender.

"No, dear. I mustn't be selfish. Mr. Clay is *your* friend."

She closed her eyes against the glow of the fire.

Hope refused to speak to Clay as he helped her on with her coat. But as he opened the front door to wave to a taxi he felt a slap from a heavy magazine.

"I got it!" she exclaimed in triumph.

Clay laughed.

"Did you? Look at the middle page."

Giggling, she opened the paper. The page was missing. Under the hall lamp Clay was unfolding a sheet that he had taken from his pocket. On tiptoes she peeped over his shoulder.

"*Gathering of New Seekers at——*" Her voice stopped.

"Yes," said Clay half aloud. "That's the chap!"

Hope's eyes were glued to the picture.

"The man who—follows me!"

"The man who was there when your car was nearly wrecked. The man who has just succeeded to his murdered father's fortune!"

In a scared voice Hope asked what the painter

knew about the mysterious watcher. Lucien was not sorry to parade the progress he had made.

"Claud Bynion!" she breathed.

"You noticed who was standing next to him?" Clay pursued.

"I only saw *him!*" she answered.

She took the page in her hand. Clay saw a look of fear across the lovely face.

"Aunt Mina!" she whispered.

CHAPTER VI

Vox Populi, Vox Dei

THE taxi that carried Hope and Clay toward the New Search Cathedral chose the way through the Park. Near Stanhope Gate a crowd had spilled out from the grass and blocked the left of the road. The driver honked his horn. Clay thrust his bare head out of the window. It was assailed with abuse.

"Look at 'em!" called a raucous voice. "Look at ther parasites that feed on our sweat. Rolling erlong in their motor cars, dressed in diamonds and boiled shirts, flushed with wonterness and champagne, dermanding the proletariat ter get out er their way—off ther bleeding earth!"

The eloquence flowed from a little man who was controlling with difficulty a scarlet banner on which the words "WORKERS, UNITE" had been sewed in white tape.

Clapping the black wideawake on his head and buttoning the orange check ulster, with a sign to Hope to stay where she was, Clay leaped out of the cab.

"Are you talking to me?" he asked truculently from the edge of the crowd.

The shabby little man stared at him.

"Pardon, Comrade!" he said. "I 'adn't seen yer 'at. I took yer fer one er the Vampire Rich riding with 'is Painted Woman!"

The crowd was inclined to take Clay's side.

"Thet's no wy ter talk of a laidy!" Since the critic sported a hat with feathers she was clearly an authority.

"Goes too far, 'e does!" agreed an elder with a walrus moustache. "A joke's er joke."

"And politics is politics!" The retort came from a skinny-necked man who was handing leaflets.

"There's too much politics, that's what I say," a super-froth-blower opined. "They only make for trouble in the 'ome. My old woman, since she got the vote . . ."

"Political murders," cried a voice. "That's what they're doing now!"

The little man with the banner leaped into the fray.

"Political murders my foot!" he exclaimed idiomatically. "'Oo says killing a man-heating tiger is murder? And 'ow much better is a millionaire?"

There were murmurs of "Shame" from the crowd.

"And 'Shaime' ter you!" he yelled. "Derserting yer class! Any'ow, 'oo's killed ther perishers? Aren't they a-killing themselves, pursued ner doubt by the 'auntings of er guilty conscience?"

"The noospapers say it's Communists." The

speaker's cigarette stuck to his lip and waggled. "I shouldn't be surprised!"

"Chaps like 'im!" Indignation was rising. The scraggy-necked man put his pamphlets in his pocket, turned up his collar, and was absorbed into the crowd.

"Politics is one thing. Murder is another." The froth-blower's breath explained the high price of brewery shares.

"Something ought to be done!"

A feeling that it might, advised the orator's remaining adherents to melt into the night. A Fascist in a dirty black shirt calculated that his moment had come. He struggled to the soap box and laid a hairy hand on the banner.

"Friends," he asked, "is this to go on? Don't you see that when the Bolshies have killed off the rich, they'll start on what they call the bourgeois? That's you, and you, and you." He pointed to the better-dressed members of the crowd. His eyes fell on Clay. "And you!"

Clay's eyes flamed.

"To be called a bourgeois by one of the British Fascists!" he snapped. "The Communist had better manners!"

The man in the black shirt swept on.

"First they slaughter the rich and the middle classes; then they oppress the workers. That's what they did in Russia; that's what they want to do in England! Shall we let them?" He answered his own question. "Not if you're men."

The murmurs of "'ear, 'ear" that greeted his eloquence suggested that it was safe to set an example. He snatched the miserable banner out of the Communist's black-nailed hands and tossed it to the crowd. The work of the Communist's wife with cotton and tape was soon undone.

Encouraged by his success, the Fascist laid his hand on the little man's collar. A leg slid in front and a push behind sent him flying into the crowd.

"Show him what murder feels like," shouted someone at the back.

The suggestion might have been acted on if Clay had not thrust his way to the front. His lean arms encircled the prostrate orator.

"I'll teach you to call me a bourgeois!" he growled at the indignant Fascist.

A heave and the little wretch was on his feet. No one interfered. There was a general feeling that the lean stranger carried vitriol on his tongue and dynamite in his pocket.

"And 'oo the 'ell are you?" a red-faced man with a flavour of the Silver Ring found courage to ask.

The rescuer drew himself up to his full height.

"I am Lucien Clay!"

There was a pause while the docile British crowd racked its memory. The confidence of the boast left no doubt that the name was famous. Each man filled in his own conception of Glory. The football fan guessed that record sums had been paid for Clay's transfer, the movie enthusiast assumed that his fea-

tures had startled ten thousand screens, the pick-pocket supposed that the police of two hemispheres were familiar with his fingerprints. This uncertainty gave Lucien the start he needed. His lifted finger signed to the taxicab. His raised knee met the protruding stomach of the racing tout. His bony fingers gripped the Bolshevik's arm and swung him through the door that Hope held open. The driver of the taxi stepped on the gas and left the mob cursing in the roadway.

For a little while none of the trio in the cab spoke. Then the little man voiced his surprise.

"Why did you do that?"

Clay's answer was not explicit.

"Because I disliked you less than the other chap."

Hope's kindness covered the artist's sneer.

"Are you hurt?"

The Communist shook his head. His voice and manner had changed for the better.

"I'm grateful," he said quickly. "You're Miss Moreland, aren't you?"

Hope showed her amazement.

"How did you know?"

"Never mind. Will you take a bit of advice from a Communist?"

She laughed.

"You've a right to your opinions."

"A right—and a reason. But never mind that." He bent forward, and his bristly lips brushed her ear. "If you're fond of life don't go for walks alone!"

Before the startled girl could question him he had turned the handle and jumped out of the moving cab. Hope stuck her head through the window. Already her mysterious adviser was hidden by the stream of traffic. When she turned to Clay she found that he was examining an automatic pistol.

"Where did that come from?" she asked nervously.

"Your boy friend's pocket!" was the casual reply. "I felt it when I lifted him. I was afraid it might go off."

He slipped the pistol carelessly into the pocket of his ulster.

"I don't believe in firearms," he remarked. "The brain is a more formidable weapon."

Hope's laugh sounded a little forced as she repeated the warning that the Communist had given.

"You're so clever. Do you think there is anything in what he said?"

Clay's answer took a moment.

"I think that someone is planning your death. Whoever it is will stick at nothing. He criticized my painting."

"Would I be safer out of London?"

Clay scratched his head.

"Possibly." He added pointedly that he could get away just then.

"Oh!" exclaimed Hope. "I wouldn't dream——"

"It'll be dreamless night for you"—his voice was grave,—"if you go alone."

The girl explained that she would not be alone. Her aunt had proposed a fortnight in the country. A sort of hotel place. In Hampshire. Miles from anywhere. It sounded rather fun.

"Your aunt!" mused Lucien doubtfully, and then, as the girl's eyes narrowed, he made haste to ask the name of the place.

It was known, she told him, as Blackmere Priory. Before the Reformation there had been a religious house. There was a little lake or fish pond. The nearest village was called Longbarrow.

The painter sat bolt upright.

"Longbarrow? That's where Sir Robert Bynion lived—and died."

Hope pointed out that he had to die somewhere. "Anyhow, Longbarrow is miles from the Priory."

"The professional strategists say that attack is the best defence," Clay murmured to himself. "It's certainly the easiest. We wouldn't be so damnably in the dark."

Hope's look of appeal was designed to flatter.

"*Please*, may I go?"

"Yes!" Clay had made up his mind. "Tell your aunt I am coming."

Hope did not like everything taken for granted.

"It sounds rather—odd," she protested.

"Does it? You can say I am painting your portrait."

"Gosh!" thought Hope Moreland as the taxi stopped at the cathedral in Park Lane.

CHAPTER VII

"Priests, Tapers, Temples Swim Before My Sight"

—*Pope.*

SERVICE had started by the time Clay had paid off the taxi. Above his head the outline of the Neo-Byzantine dome was softly luminous in concealed electric light. From the top of an invisible minaret the red flare of a beacon summoned believers to the Search.

Lucien stared unconcernedly about him, as a sacristan in green escorted the late comers to the back of the crowded building. The seats, which a gesture of the white wand indicated, had more the look of fauteuils in a luxurious cinema than places in a pew. The congregation might have been an audience at the opera. Tiaras, tail coats, bare shoulders, white waistcoats were as common as jet and black bonnets in the established church.

Under the cover of his hat Clay whispered a comment.

"So many religions attract the poor and the sorrowful. Brother Cosimo didn't make that mistake."

Hope frowned. Her senses were affected by the beauty surrounding her. Pillars that reached up in the

darkness like the white trunks of trees in a Congo forest; a chapel that opened like a cave with the glitter of mosaics or jewels at its heart; a cupola that might have been the calyx of some mysterious flower; arches, baldachins, and domes that hung high up in the half light, defying nature.

A procession was winding its august way along the darkened aisle. By some trick of lighting, each beautiful face of man or boy, each vestment stiff with gems, swam in a pool of radiance. The silence was profound. The slip of sandalled feet emphasized it. Censers swung, and opaque puffs of heavy-odoured smoke obscured the ripple of the mystic phalanx. Never ceasing to advance, the procession formed and re-formed, wound and twisted. It vanished behind a group of columns, to reappear, noiseless and interminable as the green and gold coils of a python. It flickered half hidden by a grille; was bisected by the inky shadow of an arch; always the blink and twinkle of torches troubled and perplexed the eye.

Hope felt Clay's breath on her cheek.

"As pretty a trick of mass hypnotism as you'd find outside the Orient."

"*Please!*" she begged. "It's so lovely!"

He ignored her protest. "You can mesmerize one man with a shaving glass. It takes a more elaborate effect to fix a thousand!"

As he spoke the lights blacked out. Every face, every arch, every column disappeared. In the darkness the lungs of the great organ heaved and sobbed.

The reeds spoke in a poignant, hesitating minor. A lost soul was asking its way in the night.

As the notes died away, *"What is it, Brothers, that you seek?"*—the rounded, silvery voice picked up the key. A shaft of light dropped from high in the dome to rest on the ascetic features of the priest who was known as the Guide. He was standing, wrapped from throat to foot in purple, on an ambo draped in royal purple. His majestic figure, resplendent in the bath of light, defied the darkness.

"How can a man find happiness," he asked, *"who does not know his own will? The old world was wiser. 'Know yourself,' taught the Greek thinker. To-night I invite you all to that knowledge. To-night I hold out the key to happiness with both hands."*

The gesture with which he illustrated his words could have been surpassed by no tragic actor.

"Most of you," he said, *"are in the novitiate state. Such as are true Seekers should present themselves to be prepared for full initiation at the Leader's own hands. He will teach them to recognize their souls' desire. Next week at the Blackmere Sanctuary . . ."*

Hope was to hear no more. Her arm was gripped.

"Blackmere? Isn't that where your aunt . . .?"

She nodded impatiently. It was probable enough that the old priory had a chapel. The hotel people might allow the New Seekers to use it. Clay's interruption had covered the rest of Brother Cosimo's words. The beautiful voice was silent, and the tall figure posed statuesque on the purple-hung ambo. A

thousand lights sprang up; every recess of the vast building blazed and glittered. The voice of the great organ boomed, and the stained-glass windows rattled. Through the ivory gates that hid the choir debouched another procession, this time a triumphal march of scarlet and gold.

Down the aisle shuffled the priests, their bodies swaying to the strange rhythm of the organ. The curious serrated harmony was based on no European mode. Its scale was evolved in forests where the sun could not penetrate, to the throb of muted drums and the death rattle of suffering victims, by beings who were men by day and, under certain phases of the waning moon, beasts no less blood-esurient.

Everyone in that well-dressed, sophisticated congregation seemed under the spell of the strange melody. Heads swayed to the all-mastering rhythm. Clay alone resisted. His eyes roved. He tapped Hope's shoulder.

“Look! The man with the torch! Behind the priest like Bottomley! Where have you seen that neck and shoulder?”

Hope started. “St. James's Square!” she breathed.

Clay leaned forward to stare into the face of the torch bearer. But the flame guttered. The head on the broad shoulders was averted.

The procession reached the foot of the aisle, divided, wheeled, and stopped. The music broke off with a phrase incomplete. For a full minute absolute silence reigned.

Soundlessly the grille that separated nave from chancel opened. A broad flight of shallow crystal steps was revealed. Each step glowed with hidden radiance. At the top of the staircase stood the mysterious sanctuary that the Seekers knew as The Place of Whispers, a tabernacle hung on every side with black velvet. No note of colour or grace of outline lightened the severity.

Every head in that great congregation, and every knee, was bent. Alone Clay's eyes were fixed on the sanctuary.

He could see no sign of occupation. But through the velvet curtains, clear and low, gentle and compelling, came the voice of the Leader, speaking the valediction.

"Go forth!" it said. *"Go forth, Seekers after happiness and light. Though the end of your search be not in sight . . ."*

Of the quality of that marvellous whisper that filled every recess of the vast edifice the written word can give no understanding. In his own medium Beethoven could hint at it. But before the end of the valediction had been spoken Lucien Clay had lowered his eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

From Sudden Death . . .

CLAY had the habit of honesty. He admitted that the pleasure he took in Hope's society, as much as the fears he felt for her safety, led him to see her to her hotel. It was characteristic that on the walk from Park Lane to Curzon Street he lost no opportunity of rudeness.

Hope learned that her soul was no longer her own. She was given minute instructions about her movements—what time she was to start for Hampshire, how she must drive the car, how no one was to know her destination, how Aunt Mina was to sit alongside . . .

"I myself," said Lucien with condescension, "will act as your convoy."

"That sounds very grand." She hesitated. "Just what does it mean?"

"I will keep fifty yards behind," he explained.

"Can you drive? I didn't know you had a car!"

"A very big car," was the lofty answer. Truth compelled him to add: "Not very new!"

In neither respect was he exaggerating. Dolores was a hundred horse-power racing car that had won

the Targa Florio in 1912. Clay had been obliged to accept her in payment for a portrait of a Euston Road second-hand car dealer. As he had chosen to depict the merchant at the moment of being scourged out of the Temple, perhaps the remuneration was not illiberal.

"Why Dolores?" asked Hope. "Dolores del Rio?"

The artist sighed.

"There was a man called Swinburne," he explained patiently, "who wrote poetry before Mr. Cecil de Mille was begotten. He wrote a poem (in its day considered indecent) about a certain Dolores, whom he styled 'Our Lady of Pain.' The name seemed to me appropriate."

Hope gurgled.

"I see. Does it go very fast? Don't you have to pay an enormous tax?"

Clay's answer was vague. It appeared that a pot of paint and an interchangeable number plate diverted the attention of H. M. revenue officers. The small number of days in the year when the monster would start, reduced, with her usefulness, danger of detection.

Talking, they turned the corner of Curzon Street. A knot of loafers under a lamp post excited Hope's interest.

"Oh, do let's see what's happening!" she implored.

Clay took her firmly by the elbow and led her across the street. She submitted meekly.

"Haven't I just told you," he admonished, "to keep clear of crowds?"

He interposed his body between his charge and the excited little group.

As they drew level his vigilance relaxed. A couple of oilskin capes gleamed in the lamplight. But a quick glance at the object of their solicitude made him hurry Hope past.

"What is it?" she wanted to know. "You *are* mean!"

"I'll find out and tell you to-morrow," he promised. "Here's your hotel, and you're almost asleep. Lock your door. Put the telephone by the bed."

He hesitated and drew the Communist's revolver from his pocket.

"Have you ever used one of these?"

"Oh, no! Don't they make a terrible noise?"

"Not necessarily."

He tipped the cartridges out of the chamber into his palm before he handed her the weapon.

"You can't shoot yourself now. And you're just as likely to frighten the other chap!"

Feeling like the heroine of an underworld film, she slipped the automatic into her handbag. She stood for a moment on the doorstep, ready to wave good-night when her late companion turned. Without looking back, he walked with long strides to the circle under the lamp.

Its centre was a handsome old man with sweeping moustaches, who lay supine on the pavement. A doc-

tor had loosened the high collar and stiff shirt. One of the policemen had pushed a rolled cape under the white head.

The colour of the old man's lips prepared Clay for the verdict.

"We are too late!" The doctor dusted his knees.

"'Eart failure, sir?" The policeman produced the inevitable notebook.

The doctor thought so. He could not say without further examination. Who was the old gentleman?

No one knew. As he was hatless, someone suggested that he had been taking the fox terrier, who was licking the ear that grew momentarily colder, for his nightly run.

A taxi stood against the curb. Its driver deposed that he had seen the deceased throw up his arms and stagger across the road. Except for the policeman at the corner the pavement had been empty.

Clay was staring at the dead man's features. He touched the constable's arm.

"I think I can identify."

The representative of the law eyed the Bohemian without favour. The forked red beard that is traditional of Judas Iscariot does not inspire confidence.

"Oh, you can, can you?" said P. C. 338. "And who might you be?"

"I recognize the deceased," the artist informed him, "from painting his portrait some three years ago. He never paid me for it, and his death is a personal bereavement!"

"Who did you say he was?"

Sir William Newton's was a well-known name. He had extracted more appendices, healthy and unhealthy, than any man in Harley Street; at a hundred and fifty pounds a time, the night's occurrence must represent a considerable windfall for the Inland Revenue.

"Another of them plutocrats!" muttered the night porter of Hope's hotel who had joined the little crowd. "It makes one jest about glad to draw one's three pound ten a week!"

"Did he die natural?" asked someone in the crowd.

"Natural!" echoed a man in a yellow mackintosh. "All these deaths look a bit *too* natural! What are the police doing?"

"Asking you to move along," retorted P. C. 74.

"It's the Communists," opined the taximan. "That's what I think!"

"It may be," said P. C. 338 discreetly. "And then again it may not."

He glanced at Clay to see what the acquaintance of the dead man thought. But Clay was staring at a shabby figure that leaned against the lamp post and employed a toothpick. How much, he wondered, did the little man he had rescued in Hyde Park know about the sudden death of the unfortunate surgeon?

CHAPTER IX

A Battered Caravanseraï

"BLACKMERE!" surmised Clay as the road swung sharply to the right of a narrow sheet of water. Trees grew to the margin and stretched distorted fingers of black shadow over a glassy surface. So might the stems of candlesticks round a coffin streak with reflected blackness the polished lid. A half-sunk wherry with a leaning mast rotted in the mud at the edge of the pool.

Clay was not sorry for the reassurance of a pair of wrought-iron electric lamps, flanking the narrow road, that human habitation was at hand. With less than his usual self-confidence he wondered whether he had been wise to allow Hope (in the spatter of whose mud he had held Dolores, complaining in every gear) to take shelter in this desolate spot.

Another bend in the drive brought him in sight of a group of buildings that did little to relieve his anxiety.

That dilapidation can inspire a comfortable and eupeptic melancholy the taste of our Georgian ancestors for artificial ruins is proof. But the cholorotic skeleton of Blackmere Sanctuary could awaken little

but apprehension. Built at a period when the monkish imagination was at its most debased, by an abbot whose early death would now be laid to the credit of General Paralysis of the Insane, the narrow, peaky arches, the ignoble pillars and the avid doorways must always have chilled the marrow.

Dignity had not come with age. Decay does not make a mean mouth more beautiful. The breaches in the walls, fallen buttresses, and shattered masonry suggested nothing finer than a jawful of neglected and carious teeth.

Although there is no record that the last abbot laid the traditional curse, none of the distinguished English families that succeeded the Church was for long able to maintain possession.

The Civil Wars ruined the heirs of the successful African slave trader to whom the Virgin Queen had deeded the property. The Dutchman, who catered for Charles the Second's pleasures during his exile and received the Priory as his reward, backed the wrong side at the Revolution and ended his days in Geneva. Wealth could not save the nabob of Georgian days from prison when he applied the principles of Oriental government to the Blackmere cottagers. The Factory Act of 1847, interfering so infamously with the liberty of the subject, reduced the daily hours of female labour to twelve and the Victorian owner of the estate to penury.

After the absurdly premature ending of the European War had made it impossible for Sir Adolph

Bolm to keep up a country as well as a town seat, the place stood for several years without a tenant. Early in 1926 a limited liability company was formed with the joint object of paying fees to its directors and converting the habitable part of the buildings into an hotel.

The hotel, which stood some hundred yards to the north of the ruins Clay had first seen, did not affect his nerves as unfavourably as the chapel. A free-handed restoration had given the place something of the grandeur of a county lunatic asylum.

An unmistakable inmate was digging a narrow trench along the edge of the road. Not wishing to arrive at the door at the same moment as Hope Moreland and her aunt, Clay brought Dolores to a standstill.

"Warm work digging," he remarked amiably.

The man with the tiny head stared at him.

Clay repeated his statement. Part of his meaning seemed to penetrate.

"It's never warm digging a grave," the microcephalic said cheerfully.

Clay suggested that the trench looked more like a drain than a grave.

The idiot seemed disappointed.

"I've dug graves all my life," he explained.

Clay indulged his humour.

"Looked at broadly," he agreed, "a trench is only a connected series of graves."

The man gave a high laugh and stooped over his

work. Clay drove up to the front door. No company he was likely to find inside the hotel could be more depressing.

A glance around the lounge that led out of the hall made him wonder. The room was in the power of the usual number of elderly spinsters occupied in dodging draughts, the inevitable cripple in the standard wheel chair, the unmistakable retired colonel with his unfailing chatter about *tiffin*, *chuprassis*, or *safari*.

Without apology Clay planted his chair between the fire and three survivors of the massacre of the Eleven Thousand.

"Is the brandy here drinkable?" he asked the cripple genially.

Only physical disability prevented the elderly man with the high forehead from edging away.

"I'm afraid I don't know." His fingers fumbled with the fringe of his rug. "I'm not allowed to touch stimulants."

"What on earth do you do with your day?"

"There are other pursuits," was the mild reply. "Scientific, for instance. You may have heard of my little brochure on Hermaphroditism in Fish? Wentworth, my name is, John Wentworth. No? Well, you probably know that the young hagfish, *Myxina*, as it is technically called——"

"Did you mention fishing?" cut in the soldier eagerly. "I was fishing a river in the Punjab in '96—no, '97. I was alone with my *sais*, and we believed that there was a *mugger*——"

Mr. Wentworth had heard the story before. With a promptness that was commendable he punched a bell on the little table by his side. A swish of silk, and a handsome girl in a nurse's coif was in the room. Her black eyes and scarlet lips had the effect on the Anglo-Indian warrior (*mutatis mutandis*) that spring is said to have on the "wanton lapwing" and the "burnished dove." Emotion robbed the world of the story of the *sais* and the *mugger*.

"Time for my organ practice." The invalid was addressing his attendant.

"Won't the sanctuary be too cold?" Her voice was deep and faintly foreign.

"Another little pursuit of mine. There's a remarkable organ in the restored part of the chapel. I had leave to have it adjusted to my infirmity. Music is a great resource." The old gentleman rambled on about his hobbies, while his attendant's shoe tapped the floor.

"Now, Miss Lasken, if you please," he said at last.

In the doorway the wheel chair stopped to let Hope Moreland pass. Clay noticed that the cripple's body inclined in courteous salutation while his attendant tossed her head in resentment at superior beauty. In that dingy company Hope looked like an orchid in a greengrocer's.

"I've done what you told me last night," she announced, settling her slender limbs on a deep sofa by the window. "It was rather horrid. Pumping the

chambermaid and Miss Banner, the manageress, about the people in the hotel. And it was sheer waste of time."

"Why?" demanded Clay.

"They are *the* most harmless lot. Nearly all New Seekers. They've come for the Initiation next week. Colonel Webb and Miss Manfred, and the rest."

"Mr. Wentworth?"

"No. He lives here. He's enormously rich. He's built himself an aquarium in the cellars to study his deep-sea fish, and he's a very generous gentleman, the chambermaid says. That nurse is his heiress."

"Lucky girl!" commented Clay. "The wheel chair might run down into the lake any day!"

Hope shivered.

"*Don't!*" she protested. "He looks a dear!"

Clay laughed.

"Is that all they told you?"

"I think so. Brother Cosimo may arrive to-morrow to prepare candidates for Initiation."

Clay grunted.

"How's your aunt?"

"Resting after her drive. And massage. You know, I had a terrible time with her about you. She was positively shocked."

Clay chuckled.

"You do it well!" he remarked.

Hope drew herself up.

"Do what?"

"The great-grandmamma stuff."

"I haven't the vaguest idea of what you are talking about."

"The youth of your august ancestress was hedged with chaperons, fainting fits, and womanly tremors to please her elders. You have revived them to please yourself. Your poor Aunt Mina doesn't in the least want to be your chaperon. You make her."

"I never did——" began Hope faintly.

The artist swept on.

"I'm not blaming you. The result is delicious. A work of art. But not an original. A pastiche."

Hope was blushing. To hide her cheeks she turned to look out of the window. She found herself staring into the eyes of the man from St. James's Square!

CHAPTER X

The Man From St. James's Square

CLAY did not miss Claud Bynion the third time. One hand pushed open the casement window, the other pressed the back of the sofa. A flying vault, and the painter landed on all fours in the drive.

The watcher shrank back into the darkness.

"Give me a hand," called Clay. "I think I've sprained my ankle."

"Serves you right!" came the unsympathetic reply. "What made you jump out of the window?"

"A bet!" stated the investigator. "That old hag with the purple shawl owes me half a crown."

Reluctantly the young man extended a hand.

"You'll have to help me to the house." Clay stood on one leg. "Are you staying here?"

Claud Bynion hesitated.

"Yes. I was looking for the front door. I've just come."

"On foot?"

The young man scowled.

"My father used to live at Longbarrow. I walked over."

"Funny not knowing the front door though you live so near!"

"What the devil are you hinting at?"

"What the devil were you looking at?"

Bynion swore. Need he account for his actions to the first stranger?

Clay saw that he could bully nothing out of this quick-tempered young man. He excused his tone by the pain in his ankle.

"We mustn't quarrel," he protested. "I expect we are co-religionists."

Bynion examined him dubiously by the light that poured through the glass of the hall door.

"Are you to be initiated next week?" he demanded.

Clay rose to the occasion.

"If I am deemed worthy!"

His companion pushed open the door. He did not seem anxious for a longer dose of the artist's society.

"I expect you can manage now."

"I can't. I'm worse." Clay leaned more heavily on the broad shoulder. "Help me to the lounge!"

"I'm going to the bar," objected Bynion.

Clay's heart, in spite of his suspicions, warmed.

"*Ingenui vultus puer ingenuique pudoris*, it isn't open yet!" he declaimed.

A rucksack hitched on the young man's back offered further excuse. "I can't carry this into the lounge!"

"Take it off. I'll wait."

Clay supported himself pathetically on the back of a chair.

"You don't often see those in this country," he remarked.

Bynion explained that he had bought the article in Germany, when he was studying for his medical degree.

"I suppose I'd better look at your foot before dinner," he offered reluctantly as he threw open the door of the lounge.

Clay expressed the view that his injury would mend if his benefactor would help him to the sofa in the window. Bynion darted a glance in the direction indicated and seemed about to refuse. Clay's grip on his arm never loosened. With a shrug, the young man helped his patient to the place by Hope Moreland's side.

His hurriedly averted back allowed a whispered word in her ear. A lean hand held fast to Bynion's coat.

"You haven't met Miss Moreland," said Clay aloud.

Introductions were effected, and Hope began to play her part.

"Weren't we staying at the same hotel in London?" she laughed. "Didn't we nearly meet several times?"

Bynion looked at the floor, but Hope chattered brightly. An onlooker would have thought she rather liked the man.

"Isn't it extraordinary us meeting here! But isn't it nice to be out of London . . ."

The sentences ran on. Claud Bynion contributed little to the conversation. His hands clasped and unclasped.

Confident that no harm could come to the girl in the presence of half a dozen fellow guests, Clay made an excuse. His ankle was better—well enough to be bathed. His exit was a masterpiece of decrepitude.

Two minutes later he was speaking to Heppel from the telephone box in the hall.

"Bynion's here. Staying at the Priory. Miss Moreland is holding him in talk. What do you want done?"

The reply did not come from Scotland Yard for a moment.

"We've no evidence for an arrest. He was free to disappear if he liked."

"Then you don't want him?"

"We want to keep an eye on him. I'll put a chap on the job."

The detective added he would like to see the painter next day. Rendezvous at Longbarrow at the scene of the crime. Mackenzie and the county police might have missed something.

"Did the London police miss the murder in Curzon Street?" asked Clay offensively.

Even on the telephone, Heppel's voice sounded a little flat.

"That case is true to type. The doctors haven't

finished the post mortem. I think Sir William's death will go down to natural causes."

With a grunt the artist replaced the receiver, but a heavy tread on the floor of the hall warned him to linger in the cabinet. The stairs creaked. He opened the door a slit and watched Bynion mount the stairs. There was no trace of a sprained ankle in the painter's noiseless pursuit. The sound of discarded boots on the floor of bedroom Number 14 assured him that the young man was safe for a time.

Hope he found apologetic. As soon as she had started to ask questions her victim had discovered that it was time to dress.

"What did you make of him?" asked Clay.

"He had something on his mind."

"That might be anything—a woman, a bill. I mean his face."

Hope played with a pendant.

"He *is* rather handsome!" she admitted.

The artist swore.

"Isn't that like a woman?" he asked the ceiling.

"Because a man has well-oiled hair and a Greek profile she falls for him. She doesn't think what a straight nose may mean!"

"His nose isn't straight," she corrected. "It must have been broken some time playing rugger. That is what's so nice."

Clay clenched his fists.

"He's a rowing man, and his nose was broken by a chucker-out on Boat Race night."

Hope glanced up at the painter from under long lashes.

"And see here!" shouted Clay. "I'm not saving your life for the pleasure of hearing you rave about another man."

Hope hid a smile. Fancy! Lucien jealous!

"But don't you think he's good looking? Honestly?" she asked demurely.

Clay recovered his calm.

"I'm interested in what his face *means*."

"Do tell me!"

Lucien ticked off the points on his long white fingers.

"A bony jaw, wider than a low forehead—action—violence even—before reflection. Long trunk and arms, high square shoulders, broad thumbs—all signs of a vehement ambition. Strong passions lurk in that lump at the base of the skull. Those rather full lips don't indicate much self-control. . . ."

Hope was leaning forward.

"Yes, but *murder!*" she exclaimed.

Clay reflected.

"Under certain circumstances," he declared emphatically, "that man would kill!"

Hope's hands were clasped.

"Doesn't he sound—wonderful!" she sighed.

CHAPTER XI

Murder Will Out

THE chauffeur who was washing the royal blue Rolls cocked his head and listened. Never had he heard the imperfections of the internal combustion engine so succinctly or so profanely described.

The vitriolic phrases must at last have stung Dolores. There was a roar as if someone had dropped a match in a rocket factory, and the old racing car shot out of the garage like a charging rhino. Clay, auburn ulster wrapped close round his lean form, and red beard astream in the wind, clung desperately to the steering wheel.

The rattle of the exhaust drowned old Mr. Wentworth's fugue as Dolores rocked past the chapel, down the road to Longbarrow.

The blinds were lowered in the windows of the castellated mansion. For Longbarrow House had been built in spacious Victorian days when your architect gave you turrets and machicolation, minarets and cupolas, if you paid enough.

An Airedale, who looked as if the moths had been at his coat, lay across the doorstep. As Clay pulled the bell he bared his teeth. The maid who came apolo-

gized. Cæsar was nearly fourteen, and the vet had promised to lighten his burden of long living. Clay listened impatiently. He had come to see Superintendent Heppel, not to bury Cæsar.

The girl tossed her head. The detective, she snapped, was waiting in the Garden Room.

Clay found his friend standing on the grass in front of the detached stone building that had seen the last moments of the draper millionaire. The detective's bowler hat and blue serge suit did not harmonize with the lawns and lily ponds of the well-swept garden.

Except for the removal of the body the Garden Room had not been disarranged since the moment the butler had discovered the tragedy. A little askew, a wooden chair stood by the square oak table.

"He sat at the table to take the poison," Heppel explained. "Cyanide kills like a gunshot. He toppled off the chair dead."

The detective consulted a plan and marked with a bit of chalk the place on the floor where the body had lain.

Clay was examining the objects that were distributed on the oak table—an expensive quarter-plate camera with its back removed, a discarded film spool, an open gardening book, with the dead man's place marked by a gardening glove.

He began to prowl. He pushed his beard into a bookcase that hung on the wall, rattled a bag of golf clubs that stood in a corner, kicked the waste-paper

basket, fiddled with an ash tray on the mantelpiece, ran his thumb along the blade of a pair of pruning shears suspended from a nail, and opened a fly book that lay in a glass-faced cupboard full of fishing rods.

He looked round to shoot a question at Heppel.

"Where did he keep the cyanide?"

The detective walked deliberately to a cupboard, turned the key that was in the lock, and took out a cardboard oblong. Holding the packet a little way from his face he showed the artist a handful of white salt.

"He always kept the room locked," he stated.

"The poison was safe enough in there."

Clay ran his fingers through his hair.

"Why the camera?" he asked.

For an answer Heppel felt in his pocket. From his black leather wallet he produced six negatives.

"He had just taken those. He recharged the machine. The completed roll stood where that spool now stands. We had the photos developed. They didn't help us much."

Clay glanced at the six negatives. Each was of Longbarrow, house or gardens.

"He knew how to make a picture!" the artist in him commented.

Heppel advanced a chair from the wall and sat down heavily. He laid his bowler hat on the table.

"A healthy, happy old gentleman walks into an isolated room under the eyes of one of the best junior

detectives we have at the Yard. No one comes near the room. No one leaves it. At the end of half an hour the old gentleman is dead on the floor. No one is concealed in the room. This case has got me beat," Heppel concluded gloomily.

"Naturally!" retorted Clay. "To solve the problem you need psychology. Unfortunately, psychology isn't issued to the police with bludgeons and insufflators."

The superintendent caressed his baldness. "We seem to knock along without."

"When a murderer," retorted Clay, "is public spirited enough to leave a trail of bloodstains, handfuls of hair, broken sleeve links, footmarks in the snow, cigarette ends in the grate, and fingerprints on a blunt instrument, the police sometimes contrive to catch him—or someone like him! But here you have no clue except the psychology of the dead man!"

"I'd give a bag of psychology," complained Heppel, "for one single fact!"

Clay extended the spatulate finger that he liked to explain was the stigma of genius.

"There's your fact!" he declared.

"Blessed if I can see it!" sighed the detective.

"Isn't a corpse fact enough for you? The old man lies there dead!" He pointed at the imaginary body at his feet. "Was his death murder, accident, or suicide? Suicide? You told me at the museum that

there was no reason why he should take his life—no money losses, ill health, women, worry, blackmail, fear—none of the usual provocations to cut the Gordian knot of life!”

“There are cases of suicide from sheer boredom or depression,” suggested Heppel.

Clay shook his impatient head.

“Not when the victim has the temperament of Sir Robert Bynion!”

“You said you had never met him!”

“But I’ve seen his playroom,” Clay explained. “Look at that bookshelf! P. G. Wodehouse and W. W. Jacobs. Are they the melancholiac’s favourites? Those golf clubs, too, in weekly use, with the unhacked golf balls that prove a low handicap, don’t they point to a healthy liver? Would these pruning shears be kept so keen by a slovenly man whom boredom might drive to despair?”

The detective suggested gently that the gardener might have ground the clippers.

“The gardener didn’t take the photographs!” Clay flicked the negatives with his pointed nail. “Do you suggest that a man with suicide in his mind would be at pains so carefully to choose and compose pictures of a house he was planning to leave forever?”

Heppel nodded. He saw the force of the argument.

“Wash out suicide!” cried the artist. “An accident,

then? Again this room gives the answer. To swallow cyanide of potassium by mistake supposes a degree of casualness and absence of mind that few people reach. The man who sharpened a pencil so neatly into the grate gave no sign of an absent mind. Nor did the man who walked across the room to deposit the ash of his cigarette in a tray on the mantelpiece. Nor were the flies in that fishing book tied in absence of mind."

"We can dispose of the theory of accident," the detective agreed.

"Murder remains!" Clay concluded. "And here the police are nonplussed by the absence of an agent to give the poison or any sign of struggle attending a forcible administration."

Heppel nodded.

"It's as plain as a temperance worker!" shouted the artist. "The cyanide was put in his mouth by a trick—and from a distance."

The superintendent asked dubiously how that could be. Lucien gave the waste-paper basket a kick. A small round tin box rolled against its sides.

"What was kept in that?" he demanded.

Heppel replied that it was the container of the film on which the dead man had taken his last photographs.

"Why a tin?" came the question. "Don't they use cartons?"

The detective mentioned that the police knew that

fact. They had chemically tested the cylinder with a negative result.

"There's something I don't understand." The painter sat with his head in his hands.

"Perhaps I can explain," Heppel volunteered gently. "After the accident we naturally went through the deceased's correspondence."

"Naturally!" sneered Clay.

"In his morning's mail we found a letter from a German maker of photographic material, asking Sir Robert to try a sample roll of a film he was putting on the market. This new article was obviously packed in a new way."

Clay did not seem to think much of the explanation.

"That may satisfy the police," was his phrase.

Heppel offered to ring up the firm and ask about their methods of packing.

"I can't see that it matters!" he murmured over his shoulder.

Waiting for the detective to return, Clay slouched motionless at the table, eyes closed and lips compressed. He gripped the body of the tin in one thin hand. The other held the lid that had been affixed with a piece of adhesive tape.

At last Heppel's solid form darkened the doorway. The painter opened his eyes.

"I see," he remarked, "that the packing *did* matter!"

"A funny business, Mr. Clay!" was the reply.

"No firm of the name on the notepaper has premises in London."

"I thought not!" said Clay calmly. "Well?"

The detective added that there was more to follow.

Other correspondence had lain on the dead man's writing table. The editor of the *Skittler* wanted photographs of Longbarrow to reproduce in his paper.

"I've spoken to Goode on the 'phone," Heppel mentioned with suppressed excitement. "He says he never wrote the letter!"

With a flourish he laid two typewritten sheets on the table. His square forefinger pointed triumphantly to their text.

"Look at the thickened tail of the g's!" he cried. "And the slant of the stroke of the t's!"

Clay barely glanced at the papers that had so moved his friend.

"More in your line than mine, Superintendent," he remarked.

Heppel slapped the letters on the polished surface.

"Both the nonexistent Boche and the fake editor," he declared, "wrote on the same typewriter!"

The question that Clay asked seemed off the point.

"Are you interested in card tricks?"

"Not particularly." The detective was puzzled.

Clay struck a match before he answered.

"Haven't you enjoyed watching a conjuror force a card on his victim?"

Heppel banged his fist on the letters.

"You mean that the murderer forced Sir Robert to take these pictures on this particular spool?"

"Exactly. We really must publish that little book on 'Detection without Tears.' "

"I don't see how taking six snapshots could kill an old gentleman," objected the literal-minded detective.

"Because you won't look at that tin!"

Heppel picked up the container and played with the scrap of adhesive tape.

"It seems to have been made air-tight!" he hazarded. Indifferently he replaced the cylinder on the table and stooped to pat the aged Airedale who had limped into the room. Cæsar bared his teeth at the well-intentioned hand.

"I hope your people kept the black paper that wrapped the spool," Clay growled.

Heppel opened a drawer in the oak table.

"The police have their points, Mr. Clay."

He drew out a long red and black curl.

"That dog is thirsty," was Clay's unappreciative response.

He walked to a wash basin in the corner of the room and half filled a soap dish with water. With the pruning shears on the wall he snipped off the outside end of the roll of black paper. Holding the fragment fastidiously between finger and thumb he submerged it. Then he placed the soap dish beside the expectant dog.

Cæsar lowered his white muzzle and lapped eagerly. The next moment he raised his grizzled head, bared his teeth for the last time, and rolled over dead.

CHAPTER XII

The Lucidity of Lucien

"I WOULD have found it harder to solve the problem," said Clay, rolling a limp cigarette on his thigh, "if I had not at one time considered a dose of cyanide for a sitter. She would talk about Art!"

Heppel clicked his tongue against his teeth.

"My ears ringing with her chatter," went on the painter, "I looked up Cyanide in the Encyclopædia. There I learned, among much else, that this salt is 'deliquescent.' Consulting the dictionary, I found that word means 'capable of absorbing moisture from the air and becoming liquid.' At that point my sitter decided that the portrait made her look like an intemperate charwoman (as indeed she did). She stopped coming. Until I saw that tin to-day my knowledge of the deliquescent properties of cyanide was wasted."

Heppel said patiently that he did not see the point.

"The murderer," said Clay, "whoever he or she was, knew that his victim kept cyanide for an innocent purpose in this room. If the same poison could be introduced into the old man's body from another source, the packet bought for the wasps would be suspected."

The detective nodded his comprehension.

"The decisive step was to send by the same post, from different addresses, a faked letter from a newspaper asking for photographs, and a doctored 'sample' spool in an airtight tin. 'D. O. D.' you may call it—'Death on Delivery.' "

The light of understanding dawned in Heppel's eyes.

"The rest was left to the victim's own hand. As soon as the sun came out, he loaded his camera with the fatal roll and spent an enjoyable afternoon photographing favourite aspects of house and garden. When, in due course, I hand over the murderer to Pierrepont's ministrations, remember in extenuation that he gave this victim a very happy last half-hour."

"First catch your hare!" said the cautious professional.

"When all the photographs on the spool had been taken," Clay went on with his story, "the old gentleman pottered with his camera into the Garden Room. He opened the back of the machine and laid the two parts on the table. Then he took out the used roll and *licked the piece of gummed paper that is provided to secure the loose end*. Since gum always tastes disgusting, and since the airtight tin had stopped the deliquescent process, how could he tell that the paper carried not only stickiness but cyanide?"

"What a fiendish invention!" cried Heppel.

"Yes, but how neat!" was Clay's reaction. "For the doomed man had time to stick down the poisoned slip and with his own fingers hide the instrument of his murder. Mark my words, Heppel, we are fighting a subtle and sardonic brain!"

The policeman nodded. Silence fell.

"He tripped up over the nonexistent branch of that firm," Heppel said at last.

"He had to choose a less-known maker than the usual English or American companies," Clay explained. "They would not send out samples of their well-established goods. The foreign name gave excuse for the unusual packing."

Heppel bent over the strip of black paper.

"This is a real German make," he commented.

Clay looked at the ceiling.

"Mr. Claud Bynion recently left Germany," he mentioned, "where he was studying medicine!"

The C. I. D. man looked up.

"Would you call cyanide a medicine?"

"For all human ills," answered Lucien.

"And Mr. Bynion was one of the few people—" Heppel was inspecting his nails—"who would know of the cyanide in the cupboard."

Clay did not answer. His fingers were tugging at his beard.

"He had the opportunity," said Heppel. "He had also the incentive. His father's death has brought him the best part of a million. I'm glad I've got him watched."

The artist stared at the floor.

"Don't forget," he muttered, "that this is only one of a series of crimes. Everything that you say about Claud Bynion is true. But what motive had he to shoot the chief Whip? What did he gain by Lord Woolmouth's death?"

"Public opinion makes this mass murderer a sort of super-Communist," Heppel reminded him. "Isn't that possible?"

"Lenin's big brother!" mused the artist. "Do you think Bynion is that?"

The little man shrugged his shoulders.

"We've got to find out. You saw him hanging about when an attempt was made on Miss Moreland. He may have engineered his own father's death. That will do for a start. To-morrow I'll have fifty men tracing the typewriter that wrote these letters, the paper they are written on, and the shop that sold the film."

Clay rose slowly to his feet.

"That violent, impulsive young man—did his ingenuous brain plan this insidious sequence of secret deaths?"

The detective's thoughts were on more practical issues.

"Would you like a man to help you guard Miss Moreland?"

"You had a man watching the Garden Room while Sir Robert was being murdered!" said Clay bluntly.

CHAPTER XIII

A Game of Poker

WHEN Clay returned alone to the Priory, he found that the party had increased in number and in cordiality. The arrival of Brother Cosimo was responsible for either increment. For who could resist the affectionate hand on the shoulder, the note of intimate appeal in the beautiful voice that urged the brotherhood of man?

"All Seekers are brothers!" he pleaded. "If we do not know each other, how can we love each other?"

After tea someone suggested a game of cards. The Guide did not draw back. Provided, he said, the stakes were not too high, there was no better way of making friends.

Clay found the game just over and the six players still sitting round the card table in the hall. Brother Cosimo must have played poker as well as he preached, for the white hands, which Clay's critical glance found a shade too plump, were fingering a pile of money. His mind, it was clear, was not on the dross. His white, benevolent head was bent in

encouragement toward the adoring Mrs. White and the adorable Miss Manfred.

Miss Manfred was known in newspaper circles as "The Sappho of the Sunday Press." Her Muse had been compared, not very kindly, to a penny-in-the-slot machine. On receipt by her agents of a contract at so much per word, the readers of a dozen London and provincial newspapers were regaled with rich and optimistic sentiment cast into the convenient form of rhyme that idealized the most ordinary subjects of their uneventful lives. The delicious Chanel frock that now revealed her slim and virginal figure had been paid for ten times over by three stanzas entitled "Better a Baby's Smile."

Next to the genius that had discovered the secret of making the language of Milton and Shakespeare pay its way, sat Colonel Webb. He was struggling to hold the attention of his pretty neighbour with a detailed account of a night he had spent sitting up for a tiger.

"When I heard that, I loaded my *bundook* . . ."

On the other side of the table, between Wentworth and Bynion, sat Hope Moreland. Clay chewed his beard. The girl took too kindly to his instructions to pump the young man. What a pity she hadn't as much sense as beauty! How delicious was the curve of that faintly powdered, unpainted cheek! At least she wasn't crazy about colours. When she had a house, the cushions would not be aniline. But it was difficult to understand what she could find in young

Bynion. The painter passed behind her chair and gathered that she was chaffing him about his ill success at poker. Clay hoped that there was no truth in an old proverb. He drew up a chair between the couple. Neither was particularly pleased to see him.

"Been out sketching, Mr. Clay?" called Mrs. White across the table. "There are some lovely bits round here!"

Resisting the impulse to explain that he was not a landscape painter, Clay accepted the alibi with a nod.

The Guide raised the dark eyes that contrasted so strikingly with his snowy hair. Had, he asked, the artist looked at the pictures in the gallery above their heads? There was a Monet that drew even unbelievers to the Priory, a Whistler or two, and some good bronzes.

"I confess I can't make head or tail of that picture of a bridge, or whatever it is," put in Colonel Webb. "Monet, is that the fellow's name? I don't pretend to be a judge of painting, but I know what I like."

"I adore Whistler," contributed Hope. "I was secretary for a Thames-side Exhibition our league got up for the Bargees' Home. But how do the pictures come here?"

"One of our first proselytes," Brother Cosimo explained, "who passed over last year, was a collector. He left his pictures to his brother Seekers. You knew poor Abrahams, did you not, Mr. Wentworth?"

The scientist nodded.

"We were initiated the same day," he said with a sigh. And then dismissing the melancholy subject, "Why is it that painters never find a worthy subject for their brushes in fish?"

Hope pointed out that Mr. Wentworth's pets formed a frequent motive as still life.

"*Dead* fish, yes!" agreed Mrs. White. "But who has painted them living?"

"Portrait of a Lobster? That sort of thing?" ejaculated Colonel Webb.

"I once wrote a sonnet on a bowl of goldfish," breathed the poetess who made Parnassus pay. "I called it 'The Humble Round.' "

"Think of the scope fish give a painter," persisted the cripple. "The multitudinous colours of their scales, their mysterious luminosity . . ."

"Mr. Wentworth showed me his aquarium this afternoon," Hope told Clay. "It was too lovely. He has a fish called Venus's Girdle. It's just a ribbon of light!"

"Venus's Girdle!" repeated Miss Manfred. "What a trade name for a corsetière!"

"And all sorts of other marvellous creatures. There were sea horses pedalling away like tiny centaurs on bicycles. There was an octopus. Quite a big one. It gave me such a nasty look."

Aunt Mina shivered.

"I saw one at Naples," she remarked. "I dreamed of it for weeks."

John Wentworth was moved to quote:

"O breast, that 'twere rapture to writhe on!
O arms 'twere delicious to feel
Clinging close with the crush of the Python,
When she maketh her murderous meal!
In thy eight-fold embraces enfolden,
Let our empty existence escape;
Give us death that is glorious and golden
Crushed all out of shape!"

The old man's lively rendering of Hilton's parody drew general applause. But the effort had exceeded his strength. He leaned back with closed eyes. Hope bent over him in anxiety. The muscles of the tired mouth moved and thanked her with a smile.

"Let me ring for your nurse," she whispered. "I'm sure you ought to rest."

Throughout the conversation Clay had not opened his mouth. Under the shelter of the shaggy vermilion brows his eyes were never still. Now they rested on Mrs. White's successfully "lifted" skin; now they seemed fascinated by the studied movements of Brother Cosimo's delicate hands; now by the poetess's glitter and poise.

Wentworth's forehead and sunken eyes proclaimed a patience that his infirmity must demand. The set of his ears and the shape of his mouth interested the portrait painter. The partial paralysis, he guessed, had deprived mankind of unusual services. If Colonel Webb had been totally paralysed, the world of thought would have suffered small loss.

The demeanour of Claud Bynion was puzzling.

Alone of that care-free party, he seemed to be ill at ease. He took no part in the general conversation. His eyes, whenever Hope Moreland looked away, were fixed on her.

A curious incident threw light on the nature of his distraction. From outside came the hum of a high-powered car. The porter ran to open the door, and Miss Banner emerged from her fastnesses.

Heralded by a collection of suitcases and golf clubs, a red-faced man in plus-fours and a plus-six cap invaded the hall. Claud Bynion, whose enormous hands had been shuffling the cards, started to his feet. The pack flew in all directions.

"Curlew, by heaven!" he cried.

Although the newcomer's attention was engaged by the manageress he could not miss the towering stature of the man who had called his name. Clay thought that a shadow of discomfort crossed the ruddy countenance. He nodded composedly enough, and the casual words: "Hullo, Bynion!" dropped easily from his lips.

An effort at self-control brought the young man to his seat. The scattered cards gave him an excuse to hide his face.

At the other end of the table Brother Cosimo, bland and unconcerned, held out a graceful hand.

"Mr. Curlew!" The perfectly enunciated syllables soothed the ear. "I was hoping that we might see you among us."

"That's right, Brother!" was the answer. "Count on Tom Curlew."

Tom Curlew added that what he needed was a bath. Afterward he was at the Guide's disposal.

His noisy ascent of the great staircase was the signal for the card party to disperse. Hope offered to wheel the invalid to his room.

Clay nudged her.

"I'll ring," he said. "You'll make Nurse Lasken jealous."

She smiled a retort, but the ring of his voice warned her. As soon as they were alone: "What's up?" she asked.

"I wouldn't spend too much time on that old man," said Clay.

"Why on earth not?" she demanded. "I like him!"

"It's not worth getting fond of any old man as rich as Mr. Wentworth nowadays," was the sinister reply. "Accidents happen so easily. Especially to a cripple."

"You think they've marked him down?" cried Hope. "Oh, nobody could be so horrible! That old dear, with his fish and his fugues. And an invalid! Who could be envious of him?"

"Well," Clay shrugged his shoulders, "don't say I didn't warn you."

"Do you mean it?" she asked, her lip trembling.

For a moment Clay was roused out of his cynical detachment.

"I smell death in this hotel," he said in a low voice.

"Can't you do anything to save him?" She was pleading now.

"I'm looking after you," was the impassive reply.

"But, Lucien, you're so clever! Couldn't you spare a little bit of your brain for poor old Mr. Wentworth?"

Clay smiled. He was no less susceptible than other men to the sweetness of flattery.

"I will," he promised, and changed the subject. "That man Curlew, he'd be the owner of Curlew & Blackett's?"

Hope nodded.

"Even granted the undying vanity of women," Clay commented, "I never understand how all those London stores can pay."

"They don't," said the girl. "You never see anyone in Curlew's."

"Your young friend didn't look pleased to see him," said Clay significantly.

"His father's store was ruining Curlew's," Hope pointed out. "Naturally, they're not cordial."

"You've been with Bynion all afternoon," he accused.

There were traces of colour on the high cheek bones.

"Lucien—you'll let me call you that?—don't you think you might be wrong about Mr. Bynion?"

Clay looked at the girl in astonishment.

"I am never wrong," he said simply.

"I think he's rather nice," persisted Hope. "Of course, he's terribly shy and a bit awkward and all that, but I'm sure—oh, quite sure—he couldn't mean to murder me!"

Clay was amused.

"You think everybody's 'nice.' Claud Bynion, John Wentworth, Aunt Mina——"

"Well," defiantly, "so they are!"

"What about the Guide?" he asked.

For a moment Hope Moreland did not answer.

"I'm not so certain about him," she said slowly.

CHAPTER XIV

"Anathoth!"

HER doubts were to receive some confirmation in the next half hour. The discovery, that was in the long run to lead to the unmasking of the author of this demoniacal crime series, was less due to the logic of Lucien Clay than to his regrettable methods of dressing for dinner.

Had Clay been in the habit of changing the striped pajama jacket, which all day served him for shirt and collar, before slipping on the brown velvet coat that counted in his eyes as evening dress; had he even put in a little not unnecessary exercise with the hairbrushes, he would have arrived too late to see the mysterious hand and the long envelope.

If he had missed that sight, the monster responsible for thirty-eight cold-blooded murders might have pursued his sanguinary way unchecked.

The great staircase of Blackmere Priory Hotel had been built in days when space was of small consideration. Hence it was possible for a man descending from the third floor to see clear down to the back of the entrance hall.

On the strip of floor thus visible stood the table

on which the visitors' letters were laid by the hotel postman. Blackmere was so remote that the last post did not arrive until dinner time.

As Clay came down the well-carpeted stairs he noticed without pleasure (for the only letters that the Bohemian received were bills and duns) that the mail was in. As he looked, a hand, at the end of a dinner-jacket sleeve, balanced a long buff envelope above one of the piles of letters. The hand hovered as though reluctant to open. Then the envelope dropped noiselessly on the table. The arm, which Clay could not identify from so great a distance, disappeared, and the swing doors that led to the lounge banged.

Incuriosity is never a failing of the artistic temperament. A yellow cat could not have dropped more silently and swiftly down the broad stairs. A quick glance to left and to right and Clay fingered the long envelope.

It was addressed, he saw, to Brother Cosimo. That was not remarkable. But if the letter had come by post as the stamp indicated, why had it been laid by a man in evening dress so solicitously on the priest's pile?

The postmark asserted that the envelope had been posted that morning in London, S. W. 1, but the lettering occupied the centre of the stamp and did not encroach on the paper. Any schoolboy could affix a used stamp to a virgin envelope.

Clay turned the bulky letter on its back. As he had

expected, the gum was moist. There was someone in the hotel who wished to conceal a correspondence with the Guide.

A glance up the stairs and one toward Miss Banner's sanctum convinced Clay that opening the flap was as safe as it was easy. Within sixty seconds his fingers were inside the thick envelope.

His first feeling was exhilaration. His sense of touch assured him that he held a bundle of bonds. The name inscribed would reveal the identity of the owner of the mysterious hand, and the half sheet of notepaper that he felt accompanying the bonds would no doubt explain the motive of the payment.

He pulled out the wad and knew that his luck had failed. The paper in his hands represented, indeed, the large sum of twenty thousand pounds—in bearer bonds. Nowhere did the name of the donor appear.

Nor was the slip of paper more explicit. On it was typewritten the single incomprehensible word "Anathoth."

A creaking stair warned Clay that his time was short. The bonds fitted easily into their envelope. The flimsy paper resisted. Crumpling it into his pocket, he licked the flap and turned to face the on-comer.

In the darkness at the foot of the stairs shimmered the snowy hair and hands of the Guide. How much had he seen? Clay's geniality was unwonted.

"Letters for you, Brother!" He picked up the pile

that belonged to the priest. "And one they mixed with mine!"

With unruffled benevolence the Guide thanked him. A glance at the buff envelope, and he ripped open his other letters.

Lucien had something better to do than watch a man he guessed to be a master of deception. Could he not deduce which of the occupants of the lounge was the donor of this lavish benefaction? To his delight he found the field of choice was narrow. None of the three spinsters who had captured the fire was wearing a dinner jacket. The arm that had dropped the envelope and had banged the swing doors must belong to one of the two men sheltering behind their newspapers.

Determined to storm their defences, Clay approached the fire with the end of the smile he had used on Cosimo.

"I think you were right." His voice carried well. "Free love is the solution!"

"Sir!" His confidante had successfully resisted all weaknesses of the flesh for three quarters of a century.

But Clay's ruse was rewarded. In consternation the *World of Golf* and *The Hotel-Keeper's Almanack* were lowered. Mr. Claud Bynion and Mr. Thomas Curlew revealed troubled faces to the X-ray eye of the artist.

CHAPTER XV

"Springes to Catch Woodcocks"

CONSIDERATION for her figure deprived Mrs. White of that birthright of every Briton, her plateful of bacon and eggs. The hour which saw her fellow countrymen compete for a second slice of ham found Aunt Mina drawing deep breaths of October air through the nose as she fetched a rapid circuit of Blackmere Lake.

The beauties of nature, far from reconciling her to her solitary walk, bored her profoundly. Without any sinking of heart she sighted in the middle distance a vivid splotch of colour that must be, she recognized, either a newly painted filling station or the winter foliage of her Bohemian friend.

The painter proved to be sitting on a fallen tree, his pencil busy on a sketchblock. His breakfast lay in a bottle at his feet.

Ever the devotee of art, Aunt Mina tiptoed across the carpet of pine needles until she could see over the worker's shoulder. The sight that rewarded her brought an involuntary gasp to her lips. Clay's hand at once obscured the paper, and his wild head swung sharply round.

"What the hell——?" he began.

The oath gave Mrs. White a mask for her confusion. If Mr. Clay felt like that she would not disturb him. The painter was not deceived.

"How much did you see?" he snapped.

She answered readily. "Nothing! What was there to see?"

Clay's nicotine-stained finger menaced her.

"Then why gasp? Sit down and tell the truth—if you can."

Aunt Mina, unaccustomed to so firm a touch, sat meekly on the log. Without taking his eyes off her face Clay handed her the sketchblock. Prepared for what was there, she stared at the paper without concern.

"What on earth," she asked contemptuously, "is all that?"

The question was not unreasonable. At the head of the sheet Clay had printed large the syllables ANATHOTH. Below that mysterious word he had scrawled every conceivable combination and rearrangement of its letters. He had fitted them into ruled squares, substituted numerals, divided them into columns. It appeared that he had made no headway.

"I'm waiting for *you* to tell me," he retorted.

"How in heaven's name should I know?" asked Mrs. White in well-simulated despair. "Anathoth? Let me see, weren't they giants or something?"

Never did the cold blue eyes leave her face.

"Don't prevaricate! Why did you jump when you looked over my shoulder? Why is the vein in your throat throbbing? Because you know what 'Anathoth' means!"

The outraged woman rose to her feet.

"I refuse to be spoken to in this way!" she cried.

"Our ancestors had more sense!" sighed the reactionary painter. "If a woman talked too much they held her under water for a couple of minutes. The same treatment worked if she refused to speak. And with a lake so handy!"

But Mrs. White was passing rapidly out of ear-shot.

"Mind you!" shouted Clay after her, "if Hope dies you hang!"

He pulled the sheet off the block and tore it to fragments which he dropped thoughtfully into the lake. He was wondering if he had been right to put the woman wise to his suspicions. But the sight she had caught of his attempts to decode the mysterious word had forced his hand. He hurried back to the hotel by a different path. There were other residents whose innocence he wished to test.

His first victims were John Wentworth and his pretty nurse. She was wheeling her charge toward the chapel. The cripple had paid, so Miss Banner told Hope, for the restoration of the organ loft from his own pocket.

"You're an early bird!" he greeted the artist.

"Worm day!" Clay was fumbling in his capacious pocket.

The scientist's pale face relaxed into a smile.

"Have you time to listen to a new Palestrina litany?"

Lucien was focussing the kodak he had produced.

"After I've taken my photographs," he temporized. "The editor of the *Skittler* wants to publish a series of prominent New Seekers."

If he had expected recognition to dawn on the faces of Wentworth or of his nurse, he was disappointed.

"Miss Lasken alone would make a prettier picture," the old man suggested.

The artist was busy with the view finder.

"Lovely as she is"—he stared into the bold eyes—"I'd rather see a flat-footed constable pushing that chair."

The girl tossed her indignant head. Even Wentworth's geniality was ruffled.

"What makes you say that?" he demanded.

"It isn't very safe to be a rich man in these days,"—Clay's voice was grim—"when you can't look after yourself!"

The scientist laughed.

"Miss Lasken takes great care of me." He smiled up at her face as Clay clicked the shutter.

"I've done my best. Hope Moreland asked me to warn you."

"How charming that young lady is!" sighed Went-

worth. "I thought kind hearts were out of fashion."

The painter had opened the back of the camera.

"That's the last!" He held out the used spool. "Would you fasten the gummed slip for me while I fix a new film?"

John Wentworth took the roll he was offered and obligingly licked the paper.

"How horrible it tastes!" he remarked with a smile.

Clay looked him in the eyes.

"It sometimes tastes more horrible," he said slowly.

The amiable smile did not falter, and Clay turned on his heel with the feeling that John Wentworth had passed his test with flying colours.

The next examinee was sitting on a veranda that plate glass had turned into a sun parlour. He was writing letters. He raised his dark eyes from the paper as Clay's shadow fell on the table and listened courteously to the artist's explanation that he was photographing all the interesting faces in the hotel.

"You have a collection, perhaps," asked Brother Cosimo, "for the purposes of your work?"

"Yes," replied Lucien. "Like the one at Scotland Yard."

The Guide raised well-pencilled brows.

"The Rogues' Gallery!" chuckled the painter.

Brother Cosimo did not seem to find the jest amusing. He mentioned that he had a letter to finish for the post.

"I won't be a minute," insisted Clay. "There's plenty of light."

The Guide slightly inclined his head. The October sun fell kindly on the ascetic profile. Again the shutter clicked, and again, by a curious chance, the last exposure of the roll had been made. The same pretext that Clay's hands were occupied was advanced to persuade the priest to affix the gummed paper.

For a moment Clay thought that his request would be refused. The Guide appeared to hesitate. Then the plump white hand lifted from a diminutive jar of water the brush that the management provided for clients who were too fastidious to lick their own stamps.

Clay wondered if there was not a faint smile on the curved lips as Brother Cosimo, with the grace of a queen conferring knighthood, handed back the film.

The attitude of the next for the test was less ambiguous.

"Take my photo?" growled Claud Bynion. "What the hell for?"

Without hesitation the artist declared that Hope Moreland had asked for it.

The young giant blushed. The subject of the heiress always seemed to confuse him. Without giving him time to protest, Clay squeezed the bulb and thrust the finished spool into his hands.

"Do you mind licking that up?"

Claud Bynion raised the paper to his mouth. His

action was suddenly arrested. His hand shook a little. A queer light came into his eyes as he stared at something that only he could see. Angrily he thrust the film into his tormentor's hand.

"Lick the damned thing yourself!" he cried.

CHAPTER XVI

A Death Trap

THE deep notes of the organ reminded Clay of his promise to Mr. Wentworth. Indifferent though he was to the litany of Palestrina, he was anxious to explore the interior of the chapel. An earlier attempt had taught him that the restored portion was kept locked.

His road took him past the sun parlour. Brother Cosimo had finished his letter. His reverend head was visible over the back of a sofa. His hand was raised in graceful gesticulation to illustrate the anecdote he was telling Hope Moreland.

Clay's confidence in clerics of any persuasion was limited. The Guide's magnetic eyes had failed to conquer his prejudice. He stepped through the glass door and without apology joined their conversation.

"Lucien!" Hope cried. "Just the person!"

Her cherry-red jumper set off her quick beauty. The soft gray tweed skirt would have struck Clay's tailor as insipid.

"Brother Cosimo," she went on, "has been telling me about the pictures in the gallery. I'm dying to see them. Do come with us."

The priest was less pressing.

"Mr. Clay is busy with his camera," he protested. "We must ask him to give us a talk on Monet another time."

He rose from the sofa and held open the door with the grace of a chamberlain at Court. Many strong men had tried to hint to Lucien Clay that he was not wanted. No instance of success has been recorded.

"My photographs are finished," he told the priest. "Of course I'll come."

A trait that contributed to Brother Cosimo's eminence was knowledge when opposition was useless.

"My dear Mr. Clay," he exclaimed, "that will be really delightful!"

In monastic days the room that was now a picture gallery had been a refectory. The hammer-beam roof and the wide windows overlooking the chapel remained. In other respects the work of modernization was complete. The walls were lined with an art shade of coarse-fibred brown paper, and the polished oak floor was strewn with Persian rugs. Two or three bronzes, as modern in outlook as a cocktail bar, stood down the middle of the long room, and at spacious intervals along the drab walls paintings in narrow gold frames were hung. One picture held place of honour in the centre of the end wall. In front of the masterpiece stood a Jacobean chair for the accommodation of the devout.

Brother Cosimo led the way to the smaller pictures.

"Let's leave the pride of the collection to the last," he said. "This Whistler pastel will show you what I was saying, Miss Hope. The delicacy of the modelling, the mental alertness . . ."

Her lovely head nodded to the well-turned phrases. Even Clay had to admit that the Guide knew his subject.

The commentary flowed on as picture after picture was visited. Before they had reached the Monet, notes of the organ floating through the open windows reminded the priest of a duty he had left undone. He consulted his watch.

"Will you, my dear Miss Hope, wait five minutes? I had quite forgotten that I had promised to give Mr. Wentworth the score of some music to practise for our Initiation on Wednesday."

When Clay and Hope were alone: "You want to watch your step with Brother Cosimo," said the painter sourly.

Hope twisted a scrap of a handkerchief.

"You won't let me speak to a soul. Yesterday it was poor old Mr. Wentworth. At any rate, the Guide isn't a rich man!"

"No," was the grim retort. "But he might want to be!"

"You've got murder on the brain," she flashed.

"A better place than the conscience!"

She turned away in irritation.

"Tell me about these statues. You *do* know something about that."

Clay shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not very easy to save your life for you." He went on without a pause: "That's a Gaudier-Brzeska. It's damned good."

"What's it meant to be?" asked the girl, puzzled by the apparently arbitrary shape of the block of marble.

"Abstract form!" snapped Clay. "You wouldn't understand."

He pointed to a second group.

"That's by Archipenko. He calls it 'Life.' "

"That lump of granite is like nothing in life that I have ever seen."

"Don't you see the living rock? Materials have their own shapes and characters. Why should a man in a white blouse tease them into photographic likenesses of naked women and deceased statesmen?"

"I think I see what he's getting at," said Hope slowly. "But what on earth is the matter with you?"

For Clay's body was stiff like a red setter pointing at the last of the row of sculpture.

"Why the hell did they put that here?" he muttered.

With slow steps he seemed to stalk the distorted mass of bronze that stood behind the Jacobean chair.

Hope followed, her mind a question mark.

"Is that an Archipenko too?"

"Don't be a fool," cried Clay. "Archipenko is an artist."

Hope could not see that, except in material, the bronze was different from the other pieces. There was the same lack of likeness to any human or animal form. The same hard angles. The same thick contour. For the enlightenment of the beholder, the title *Unconscious Cerebration* was cut on the base.

"That thing," declaimed Clay, "means nothing. It conveys no emotion, has no balance, rhythm, or form. It is lopsided, cock-eyed, and skew-ended. Why in the name of G. F. Watts have they put it here?"

"Never mind," Hope soothed him. "They all look the same. Now tell me about the Monet."

She seated herself in the oak chair and fixed her eyes on the masterpiece that hung alone on the end wall.

"How lovely!" she breathed.

Clay stood beside her, his hand on the arm of the chair, his senses fascinated by the beauty of the picture in front of him. The notes of the organ fell on his inattentive ears. The harmony had changed, and a strange un-European melody drifted through the wide-open window. Vaguely he wondered where he had heard that music. A picture of blood-red priests swaying down a lighted aisle . . . the sound of shuffling, sandalled feet . . . Of course, the marching hierophants of the New Search Cathedral! That must be the music that Brother Cosimo wanted played at the Initiation.

Some sense of evil, some smell of death made Clay

turn his head. A warning shout burst from his bearded lips.

"Look out, Hope! Look out for yourself!"

Hope gripped the arms of her chair, but Clay's leg, lean as the shin of a skeleton, was braced against its bars. Every ounce of strength he possessed he let drive. Hope felt herself propelled across the room. She fell sprawling against the wall.

Surprise stunned her. Had Clay gone mad? The next instant the unwieldy lump of metal that had stood behind her chair came crashing to the floor. She felt the wind of its fall. Her nerves winced. The room seemed to rock. The air was full of dust. . . .

There was a long silence. Hope could hear her heart beating. Her eyes were shut. She forced herself to open them. The ton of bronze lay across the matchwood of the chair she had so lately occupied. The painter leaned against the window sill. His face was very white.

"He nearly got us that time!" he whispered.

"But how?" gasped Hope. "The room's empty!" Clay nodded.

"So was the room where Sir Robert Bynion died."

Four quick steps carried him to the door. He flung it suddenly open as if he expected to find someone on the other side. The wide corridor was empty.

"There's a back staircase," Hope volunteered. Her spirit, rising to meet the danger, had shed its pose of timidity. "I'll look!"

Before Clay could protest, her long skirts had

fluttered round the corner. He shrugged his shoulders and returned to the gallery to ruminate over the wreckage.

While he was still searching for any agency that could have disturbed the precarious equilibrium of the lump of bronze, he heard Hope's quick breathing.

"Guess who was there!" Her eyes were very big. "Bynion?"

"No. None of the people you are so anxious I should avoid. Your Communist!"

"That shabby little man in Hyde Park?"

Hope nodded.

"He was wearing a green baize apron, and he had a pair of boots in his hand. But I knew him at once. I could see he recognized me too."

"Boots at eleven o'clock!" Clay seemed amused. "Invention isn't his strong point."

"What's a Communist doing here?" asked Hope. "And pretending to be one of the hotel servants!"

"He's changed his beat," was the only suggestion that Clay would make. He did not seem inclined to pursue the subject. His bony finger pointed to the prostrate bulk of *Unconscious Cerebration*.

"Let this be a warning. Don't go looking at pictures with Brother Cosimo. Don't go petting hagfish with Mr. Wentworth. Don't go——"

"My mother said, I never should, play with the gipsies in the wood," "quoted Hope's resilient youth in disrespect of Clay's red hairs.

"Don't go playing tangle toes with Claud Bynion," pursued the painter unmoved.

"Please, teacher, whom may I speak to?" she asked with mock deference.

"Me!" said Lucien Clay.

CHAPTER XVII

Blackmail?

CLAY was sitting on the uncomfortable chair that faced Heppel's uncomfortable desk. Dark was falling and the superintendent was meritoriously careful of the country's electricity. A blindless window admitted the bluish glare of an arc light. The only ornament of the bleak room was an illuminated text—"Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay. Matt. V.37."—that was nailed to the sulphur-coloured wall.

Clay finished his narrative.

"So you found nothing to show you why the statue fell," Heppel summarized. "What did the hotel people say?"

"Accident!" said Clay gloomily. "One of those accidents the police and the coroners keep on discovering—that are making such a boom in undertakers' shares."

The superintendent's round face relaxed into a smile.

"We all have our failures, Mr. Clay!" he remarked. "So far my chaps haven't traced the type-

writer that wrote the letters to Sir Robert or the paper they were written on. And they went through Mr. Claud's place this morning."

"Either Claud Bynion or Tom Curlew paid Brother Cosimo twenty thousand pounds in bearer bonds." Clay gave a rapid account of the secret payment. "That's a lot for an Easter offering!"

Heppel listened attentively, while his hand drew triangles on the blotting paper.

"Both of those gentlemen stood to gain by Sir Robert's death," he said slowly. "Mr. Claud was his heir. Mr. Curlew his trade rival—an unsuccessful one at that. My report says that the *Galérie Mondaine* would have driven Curlew & Blackett's into Carey Street before the year was up."

"You suggest that the spool with the cyanide arrived in time to save Tom Curlew?"

"I suggest nothing." Heppel drew the base of a triangle. "I'm stating facts."

Clay made a face.

"Oh! Facts!" he ejaculated. "They always take you so far from the fact."

The detective was not to be deterred.

"Fact Number 1—both these men gained by the murder. Fact Number 2—one or other of them paid Brother Cosimo a large sum of money."

"Twenty thousand pounds would not seem a large sum to dodge the hangman!" put in Clay.

Heppel tapped the desk with his pencil.

"Fact Number 3—both these gentlemen are New

Seekers and have been initiated into the mysteries of the sect."

"What are the mysteries?" demanded Lucien.

"I don't know—yet," came the tantalizing reply. "But Fact Number 4 is that some kind of confession figures in the ritual."

He paused and looked up from his blotting pad into the face of the artist.

"I see," said Clay, "that, unscrupulously, you want me to draw unjustified conclusions from misleading facts. You want me to advance the theory that either Curlew or Bynion sent the poisoned spool. That being a New Seeker the murderer confessed his crime to his religious superior. And that that dignitary is now making him pay through the nose for the luxury. You don't think much of priests—or of murderers!"

"They are only men, Mr. Clay," was the pessimistic retort. "There is also Fact Number 5. The bonds were bearer bonds—the most discreet form of payment to a blackmailer."

Clay was tugging at his dishevelled beard.

"I wish," he said at last, "we knew more about this initiation stunt."

Heppel cocked his bald head on one side. He decided to take the painter into his confidence.

"We will!" he promised. "By to-morrow."

Rubbing his square palms together, he explained that for some time the Yard had kept an eye on the New Search movement ("Fancy religions always make work"). Two months ago he had had himself

enrolled under a false name as a member of the sect. He had received his summons to the initiation ceremony to-morrow.

"At breakfast the day after," the superintendent promised, "you shall have all the facts you want. Perhaps even the identity of the Leader whom no living man has seen!"

Clay looked at his friend with something like admiration in his pale blue eyes.

"The Dawn of Imagination!" he exclaimed. "One of these days you'll catch a criminal without my help!"

Heppel said quietly that he would be ready to retire when he had laid his hands on the mass murderer they were hunting.

"Mr. Claud Bynion," he mused, "or Mr. Tom Curlew, or——"

Clay interrupted him.

"If I know anything about faces——"

"Faces are your business, Mr. Clay. Facts are mine." He rose ponderously from his seat and took his bowler hat from the peg on the chocolate-painted door.

"My chaps searched Mr. Bynion's house for the typewriter that wrote those letters. They drew a blank. What about Mr. Curlew's office?"

Clay hoisted himself thoughtfully to his feet.

"Yes, I would like to see Tom Curlew's typewriter." He hesitated. "But I must have a word with Hope."

Heppel asked where he had left Miss Moreland.

"In a taxi at the main entrance," was Clay's reply. "With a bobby on the front seat and one inside. I'm taking no risks."

The superintendent suggested that the girl would be more comfortable in his office. Her escort could accompany her.

The painter glanced round the cheerless room.

"Comfortable!" he remarked.

Heppel pulled out a drawer.

"I expect she'll be glad of something interesting."

Clay read out the title of the volume.

"*The Genesis of Crime!*" he laughed. "She will have a rollicking evening!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"The Coward's Weapon, Poison!"

THE shop of Curlew & Blackett was closing as the two investigators reached the glass doors. Sleek young men in black coats and striped trousers were shrouding with dust sheets figures in wax as coy as the Venus de Medici and three parts as nude. A personage in a frock coat that would have done credit to a Victorian statesman watched with benignity while young ladies in long black dresses wound up ribbons and folded artificial silks. Younger ladies in shorter skirts shut up ledgers with a snap and issued from glass and mahogany cages.

Through this world of "known things changed and strange" Heppel led Clay to a lift. To the girl, whose uniform hesitated between that of a Death's-head Hussar and a skating instructress, he dropped three words: "Mr. Curlew's office."

That august spot was approached through a waiting room decorated with antique oak and Marcus Stone. The commissionaire who introduced "Mr. Maugham and Mr. O'Connor" knocked discreetly

at the door in the partition. A secretary with horn-rimmed spectacles and the physique of a question-mark informed the visitors in an Oxford accent of his regret that Mr. Curlew was out of town.

The short man contradicted him politely. Mr. Curlew had telephoned half an hour ago from the Ritz. He wanted the speaker to come directly to his office.

"Are you going to wait for Tom?" asked the red-bearded Mr. O'Connor, and added that, for his part, he had no time.

"I'll take a seat," replied the stolid Mr. Maugham. "But I need not keep Mr.—er——"

"Field," supplied the secretary.

The door to the office and the door to the passage shut simultaneously. Clay ran to a room that he had noticed to be empty except for a telephone. A moment later the girl at the store exchange was putting a voice that was alleged to belong to Mr. Curlew's chauffeur into communication with Mr. Field. . . .

Heppel was halfway through a picturesque account in the *Skittler* of a Jug and Bottle Party at Lady Calypso Booth's, when the secretary appeared in the doorway, black felt hat in one hand and leather attaché case in the other. Without surprise, the little man learned of an urgent message from Mr. Curlew requesting his visitor to wait while the secretary took some necessary papers to the Ritz. To Heppel's deep resentment, that careful functionary locked the office door and slipped the key into his pocket.

Clay found his friend in unsuccessful manipulation of the high-class lock.

"There'll be the deuce to pay," disappointment led the detective to remark, "if we bust this and find nothing."

Without replying, the artist walked to the window. Outside ran a stone balcony.

"Did Field remember to bolt the office window?" he wondered.

Softly he slid the sash upward. A lean leg hooked over the window sill. A sound of boot leather scraping on stone, and the tall shadow disappeared. Hep-pel heard the office window squeak and regretted that the moment had come for his short legs to follow the painter's length of limb from balcony to balcony.

At last, breathing heavily, he joined his accomplice on the floor of Mr. Curlew's office. He washed his grimy hands in a lavatory basin behind a screen before he approached the store owner's table. For several minutes he worked in silence.

"There's no letter paper here," he whispered, "that matches our two specimens."

Clay was warming his back at the fire.

"I never expected any," he retorted.

There was a rattle of keys as the detective ran through the alphabet on the typewriter that a low table supported. He flicked out the paper and stooped, lens in hand.

A moment later he blew out his cheeks in disappointment.

"That machine never wrote either letter!"

Clay held out half a sheet of notepaper.

"Did it write that?"

Staring, the C. I. D. man took the sheet.

"Anathoth?" he queried. "What's this?"

"Was it written on that typewriter?" persisted the artist.

The lens was busy again.

"Certainly it was!"

"Then," declared Lucien, "Tom Curlew paid Brother Cosimo twenty thousand pounds in bearer bonds."

He told the puzzled detective where the cryptic paper had been found. Heppel shook his head reproachfully.

"The way you will keep things to yourself, Mr. Clay!" he protested. "Why ever didn't you show me that paper before?"

The artist laughed.

"What hope had you with a code word that kept me guessing?"

"Code word?"

"Yes. My poor friend. Anathoth. I've worked out every possible permutation——"

He broke off to stare at the shaking shoulders of the little detective.

"Have you just seen the joke that Mrs. Heppel made at breakfast?" he snapped.

"The joke's more recent than that, Mr. Clay."

The superintendent was wiping his eyes with a blue and white spotted handkerchief. "If you knew the Bible as well as the wine lists——"

Sharply the painter bade him pull himself together. Heppel's usual gravity descended.

"Look up the Book of Joshua, Mr. Clay. You'll find that Anathoth isn't a code word. It's the name of a city, and it means 'Answer to prayer'!"

If Lucien felt any humiliation he concealed it.

"Twenty thousand pounds and a Hebrew word," he mused.

"It's six to four on blackmail," considered Heppel, his eyes on the store owner's roll-top desk. "Mr. Curlew pays the Guide, as they call him, to keep his mouth shut about a confession. In order to save his face he pretends that the money is given to the New Search movement in answer to an appeal for funds —'in answer to prayer.'"

Clay's fingers were combing his beard.

"Has Curlew the look of a big-scale murderer?" he mused. "That short, fleshy neck——"

Heppel never lifted his eyes from the desk. He dropped into the chair and worked with his stubby fingers at a panel. There was a click, and a cavity yawned.

"I thought so!" he exclaimed. "All secret drawers work the same."

His hand groped in the recess. On the palm that he held under Clay's nose lay a small opaque bottle.

He pulled out the cork and shook a little white salt into an envelope. Cautiously he sniffed it.

"Why does Mr. Thomas Curlew keep cyanide of potassium in a secret drawer?" he asked triumphantly.

CHAPTER XIX

Dolores Finds a Way Out

THERE was a ground mist on the morning of the day which the secret killer chose for his thirty-eighth murder. Fears that the light would get worse induced Clay to start work on the background of his picture of Hope without waiting longer for his sitter.

Her figure had taken shape on the canvas. She stood, tall and a little drooping, in a plum-coloured gown bordered with gray fur. Her dark hair was looped off her pale brow. The light fell strong on her forehead and unsmiling eyes; shadow veiled her sensitive mouth and delicate chin. Every critic who has seen the unfinished picture agrees that, had Fate allowed its completion, the Portrait of Hope would have been Lucien's masterpiece. For a moment, an enchantment seemed to have lifted the bitterness that habitually overlaid the painter's work. That morning he painted quickly and happily, reproducing the texture of the heavy velvet curtains in which our forefathers collected their dust. He was achieving the effect he sought, and the passage of time went unnoticed.

The door of the gallery opened. He did not look up.

"Come on," he called, "I'm ready for you."

An older voice than he expected answered.

"It isn't Hope. But can her aunt have a word with you?"

Clay looked up with his mouth full of brushes. Since their encounter by the lake Mrs. White had avoided him.

"Well?" he grunted without enthusiasm.

Aunt Mina could not make up her mind to begin. To postpone the moment she glanced over the artist's shoulder.

"Masterly!" she breathed. "Such sense of values!"

"What's the matter?" demanded Lucien. "You haven't come to play at art criticism?"

She did not resent his rudeness. She admitted that she had no claim to his time—that she couldn't help feeling he mistrusted her. But she must confide in someone. And Mr. Clay had appointed himself her niece's protector. . . .

Clay sighed and removed the brushes from his mouth. Just when he was in the vein!

"Mr. Clay, I'm frightened about Hope!"

Clay rose to his feet. He had not expected anxiety from this quarter.

"We all are," he said gravely. "That's why I stick so close."

It seemed unnecessary to give another, more personal, reason.

"Yes!" She sank her voice. "But there's something new! This morning I found another of the messages."

"Messages?" echoed Clay.

"Yes, the last one came the day the statue fell!"

Her unsteady voice, her fingers never still, suggested nerves on the edge of breakdown. He asked her what form the warning took.

"Just the word!" was her mysterious answer.

He begged her to explain.

"Why, Anathoth. The word you found out!"

For the moment he let that be. "Was the message written or spoken?"

"Written. In the middle of a blank sheet."

He held out his hand.

"It's gone. Vanished. Like the other."

It appeared she had opened the novel she kept by her bedside to find the significant letters under her eyes. She laid the paper on the dressing table while she wondered what steps to take. When she put out her hand, only some flakes of ash remained. The same rapid dissolution had befallen the note which arrived the morning the statue fell.

Clay led the agitated woman to a chair.

"Take your time," he soothed her. "And tell me what Anathoth means."

She struggled to her feet.

"I can't. I daren't. I thought you knew. They are trying to implicate me. I'll take an oath I never meant——"

The confused protests poured from lips whose scarlet looked ghastly against gray skin.

"Tell me!" insisted Clay, and added: "You don't want anything to happen to Hope?"

"I swear I don't. I never did. You don't understand. That's why I came to see you. You must save her."

Clay gave up the attempt to force her confidence. He did not want a hysterical woman on his hands.

"Where is she now?"

Mrs. White showed surprise that her niece was not sitting for her portrait. The painter glanced at his watch.

"Good God! An hour late! I never noticed the time."

Aunt Mina's plump hands fidgeted with her rings as she told Lucien of the argument she had had with her niece an hour before. Hope had complained of boredom.

"Bored!" Clay was cut to the heart. "When I am painting her portrait!"

"She did not enjoy the day she spent in London," explained Mrs. White. "She waited three hours in a taxi with two policemen. One of them picked his teeth and the other showed her how to make a rabbit out of a handkerchief."

Clay asked what more a girl could want.

"Then she sat another three hours in a poky little office at Scotland Yard reading a dreadful book on criminology. My niece was quite roused. She's had

about enough, she kept on saying, and the submissive little woman stunt wasn't what it was painted. I hardly knew my poor Hope."

Clay shook his fist at the demure Victorian he had outlined on the canvas.

"Damn her!" he said, and added as he thought of the danger she might be running: "But where is she?"

Her aunt hesitated.

"She *did* talk about choosing her own friends. She was sure Claud Bynion wasn't the sort of man Lucien pretended! Of course, I told her not to be silly; that you were doing everything for her good; that it might be dull but——"

Clay had reached the door.

"Claud Bynion!" he exclaimed. "She's about as safe in his charge as if she was hanging by her suspenders out of the top window of the Woolworth Building!"

The hall porter only confirmed Clay's fears. Miss Moreland had taken Mr. Bynion for a drive in her car, leaving word that they would not be back to lunch. The porter had heard mention of London.

"You can worship them; you can save their lives; you can make their beauty immortal—if you don't keep them amused, they're off with the first comer!" Clay, backing into the telephone cabinet, assured the puzzled employee.

Heppel's view of Hope's action was grave. Like Clay he believed that the heiress was marked down by the invisible slayer. Though the exact meaning of

Anathoth was still a mystery its use seemed ominous. Mrs. White knew more than she would say.

"I'll be in London in an hour," interrupted Clay, "if Dolores will start."

The detective approved. He promised to send out orders for the police to give assistance in the hunt. He could not join himself, for he must be ready for the Initiation at Blackmere that night.

Without waiting to hear the end of his friend's intentions, the artist replaced the receiver. As he passed the chapel on his way to the garage he heard Mr. Wentworth busy with his fugues. His lips parted in a thin smile when he remembered Hope's anxiety that he should watch over the cripple's safety. A trick, he supposed, to free herself of his vigilance.

In the yard of the garage he found Tom Curlew. The cut of his clothes, the size of their check, and a bag of clubs proclaimed his intentions.

"Coming for a game, Clay?" he inquired.

The artist looked up from Dolores's carburettor to shake his head.

"Play you for a pound a hole," the store owner offered.

"That would be eighteen pounds," Clay calculated. "I haven't got so much."

"Golf balls!" persisted the enthusiast.

Lucien explained that with Dolores's consent he was on his way to London.

"Go another time!" Curlew urged. "Such a day for a game. No wind, nice nip in the air——"

Clay damped him down with the remark that he looked on golf and its victims with loathing and pity. He bent to swing the engine. Dolores back-fired savagely. The artist nursed his wrist.

"I say!" Curlew protested with horror written on his face. "You don't mean that! About golf? What game *do* you like?"

"Bull-fighting!" retorted Clay morosely.

At any other moment he would have welcomed the chance of a talk with the man who knew the use of the word Anathoth and who kept a bottle of cyanide in his desk. But it was more vital to stop a fresh murder than to discover the secret of a former. He opened Dolores's bonnet and fiddled with her magnet.

"Why are you going to London?" Curlew had bulldog blood.

With Clay, irritation could always outbid caution.

"Because someone wrote Anathoth on half a sheet of notepaper!"

He looked up from the engine full at the store owner's face. It went white under his gaze. The grin faded, and the full lips trembled.

"What do you mean?" he stammered.

The painter did not answer. He dropped his eyes to his work. No rabbit could have hailed the distraction of a cobra with more relief. Muttering that he would play a round alone, Curlew hurried out of the garage.

"Hi!" shouted Clay. "Don't shut the doors. This electric light is rotten."

Apparently his words went unheard. The double doors clicked together. Outside in the yard Curlew's self-starter whirred. At the same moment Dolores vouchsafed a spark. The artist laboured in the closed shed. A minute's vigour with the starting handle was rewarded by a splutter and a roar.

But when he went to the doors to give Dolores passage, he found they would not budge.

"Curlew!" he cried, and hammered on the wood.

The hoot of a horn as the store proprietor turned the corner was the only answer.

Clay's fingers wrestled with the door; his mind grappled with the plots that seemed to surround him. Were Bynion and Curlew in league? The youth to carry Hope to London, the older man to stop pursuit, if the relatively fair inducement of golf failed, by the more drastic deterrent of imprisonment? The artist remembered the emotion that Bynion had shown at Curlew's appearance after the game of poker. That did not look like partnership. The mystery was deeper than he had at first supposed. Bynion, Brother Cosimo, the little Communist, Tom Curlew, Aunt Mina—all played a part. Cyanide of potassium, Anathoth, bearer bonds, Communism, blackmail, confession, bronze statuary, wheel nuts, dead millionaires—out of the seemingly inextricable tangle the keen mind of the portrait painter had picked a thread that was to lead to the centre of the maze.

But if his intelligence was not baffled he knew when his physical strength failed. His fingers could obtain no purchase on the smooth inner surface of the well-fitting doors. His body was not heavy enough to force them apart. None of his wrenches would avail to smash the lock. Would he have to wait until some haphazard chauffeur heard and released him, too late to save Hope Moreland?

The explosive rumble that Dolores maintained in her captivity bred an idea. Climbing into the driver's seat, he pushed the lever into reverse. With a grinding of gears he backed the old racer until her tail lamp rubbed the brick wall at the back of the deep garage. He threw the lever forward and, holding out the clutch, stamped on the accelerator. The roar of the engine was deafening in the enclosed space. The fumes of the belching exhaust were suffocating. The old car shook with the ever-increasing revolutions of her engine.

At last Clay judged that she would stand no more. He lifted his left foot and the clutch went in with a bang. The racer leaped forward and crashed into the double doors. There was a splintering of wood, a snap of metal, and the veteran had torn her way to the yard outside.

Clay brought her to a standstill and made haste to assess the damage. The doors of the garage were wrecked. Dolores's radiator was battered, and her fenders were buckled into a tangle of scrap metal.

But her heart beat as gallantly and as noisily as ever.

“ ‘O sanguine and subtle Dolores!’ ” quoted Clay as he jumped into his seat and headed her for London.

CHAPTER XX

Lucien Clay, Sleuth Hound

CLAY'S first act on reaching London was to garage Dolores. An elderly racing car is not her best in traffic. A visit to a pawnshop with a Byzantine lectern from his studio tucked under his arm provided funds for a taxi to Bynion's flat.

The artistic appearance did not seem to kindle trust in the heart of the square-shouldered, red-faced manservant who opened the door. Yes, Mr. Bynion lived there. No, Mr. Bynion was not at home.

Clay waved an envelope. His friend was expecting this cablegram.

"If you care to leave it, sir, Mr. Bynion may be in later."

Clay made a mental note that Claud must have touched the flat if his servant knew he was in town. The man looked like an ex-batman. The subject of the war might melt his reserve.

"Weren't you in the gunners? At Passchaendale? Don't I remember your face?"

"I don't think so, sir. I was a conscientious objector."

Clay tried again.

"I must put this cable into Mr. Bynion's hands. Where did he say he was going?"

"My master did not discuss his plans with me, sir."

But while the artist was suffering this succession of reverses his quick eyes were busy. Beside the telephone on the hall table lay a pad. The top sheet was clean save for a Mayfair number that someone had scrawled, waiting for the connection. The manservant might have been a conscientious objector; the state of the flat proved him a good worker. The scribble on the pad would be recent. By calling up that number Clay might get a line on Hope's or Bynion's movements. He hurried to a telephone booth. Eventually a male voice replied.

"Is that White's?" asked Clay.

"Wrong number. This is the Countess of Westhaven's."

"Half a minute. Has Miss Moreland been to the house lately?"

"Miss Hope Moreland has just left with a gentleman, sir."

Clay's enterprise was more than rewarded. He had hoped at best for news that she had lately rung up.

Ten minutes later a taxi deposited him at Belgrave Square. After an appraising glance, the butler told him that Lady Westhaven was not at home but that Lady Janet could see him. Had he come about the exhibition?

"Yes," said Clay promptly.

The room into which he was shown had two fireplaces and some seven windows and doors. Diminutive coal fires gave little heat, and draughts raged round yellow marble pillars. A dozen very young women were sitting in their furs. Most of them addressed envelopes. No one paid any attention to Clay.

"Darling!" called a girl at an enormous oak writing table. "Is Ryder Street S. W., or W. 1?"

"Look in the directory, angel!" A blonde was busy disembowelling a typewriter.

"I can't find the book!"

"Magdalen took it away," volunteered a girl in sable who huddled against the nearer fire.

"Isn't that the limit? What could Magdalen want with the directory? She said she hadn't time to send out any notices."

"She needed a weight for those sealing-wax things she's making!"

The defence of Magdalen was curtailed by a diversion from the far end of the room.

"I think I'm going to be sick!"

The speaker's face looked green against her squirrel coat.

"It's the gum!" suggested a number of voices.

The typewriter expert possessed the organizing brain.

"There ought to be one of those envelope-wetting things."

Work was suspended while half a dozen helpers wandered vaguely round the room moving piles of stamped letters and disturbing lists of addresses.

"Here it is!" The blonde discovered the gadget in a bookshelf.

"I'm feeling all right again." The green face had resumed its normal shade of pink. "It's sweet of you, darling, but I can lick them *so* much quicker with my tongue."

Clay thought it time to assert himself.

"I came to find Miss Moreland," he announced.

"Oh, Hope!" exclaimed half a dozen soft voices.

"She said she was coming here," the painter persisted.

An enchanting creature in a beige hat suddenly took an interest in Clay. She floated away from her waste-paper basket full of stamped envelopes and drifted across the wide room.

"Who did you say you wanted?"

"Hope Moreland."

"Oh, Hope!"

There seemed no end to this maddening game, but even Clay could not be rude to anything so manifestly thistledown.

"She said she'd be here," was obviously the move the rules of the game required.

"She isn't here now!" The turquoise blue eyes were mournful.

"So I see!" was all the fascinated artist could manage.

"No, she isn't here now! She's gone!"

Gently Clay asked if she knew where Hope had gone.

"Oh, no, I don't know *where!*"

The investigator felt he had not gained much ground.

"Have you seen the etchings?" trilled Lady Janet.
"Wouldn't you like to?"

"What etchings?"

"Oh, the etchings, you know."

Clay put two and two together.

"You've got an exhibition of etchings?"

"I don't think I like etchings very much, do you?"
His protectress had drifted to the northwest corner.

"They're so dark, aren't they?"

"Of course," said Clay, finding his feet. "If you put them against that black wall paper they won't show at all!"

"No, they won't, will they?" agreed Lady Janet.
"That's just what Joy said. She was quite *fierce.*"

"Who's Joy?"

"Joy Somerfield."

"She didn't like the black paper?"

"No, she said her etchings wouldn't show. I thought that was rather selfish."

"Selfish?"

"She *must* know my shell flowers *need* a black background!"

Clay sympathized. But by now sufficient liaison had

been established. He decided on an appeal to Lady Janet's featherweight heart.

"Do you think there is any chance of finding where Hope went? It's really important!"

"Hope?"

"Yes, Hope Moreland!"

"Betty may know. But you haven't seen my shell flowers!"

From the vague direction of her glance Clay gathered that Betty clattered the typewriter. Promising to inspect Lady Janet's exhibit when he had located Hope, he repeated his question.

"Hope Moreland?" replied the blonde. "She's dreadfully slack! She hasn't done a stroke of work since we started this exhibition. She was in for five minutes this afternoon with some kind of a man in tow. A cave-man sort of a thing. About six foot square. He carried her off almost at once."

Clay implored her to tell him where to.

"She was talking of starting Girl Guides at Wapping. I think they went to interview the parson."

As Clay escaped from the Westhaven drawing room he heard voices raised in lamentation:

"*Darling!* You haven't been sending out notices from the list on blue paper!"

"Why not, angel?"

"Oh, darling! Those are the addresses of the distressed gentlewomen we did the Pierrots for last June!"

As Clay had anticipated, there proved to be more than one parson at Wapping. At the third rectory that he visited he found news of the couple he was hunting. Hope had descended on the incumbent with an offer to organize Girl Guides. She had recovered quickly from the shock of learning that Miss Boothby had run the troop for seven years.

"Fallen Women, then!" she had offered obligingly.

The young man with her blushed and hurried her off.

"They made a very handsome couple," the rector considered.

"Bah!" spat Clay. "You were too busy humming the Wedding March to hear where they were going?"

The Wapping parson was accustomed to bad manners.

"The young man said, 'It would have been better if you'd listened to me!'"

"Splendid!" interrupted the painter. "No woman will stand much of that!"

Hope's response had been that she didn't like the St. James's.

"Savoy, then?" Bynion offered and had secured her approval.

"*Thé dansant!*" exclaimed Clay, and left the rector on his doorstep wondering how many more lunatics would waste his time that day.

If Clay had been successful in following Hope's trail he had not been able to keep pace. By the time

he reached the Savoy the band was putting away its instruments.

His luck held. He heard his name called. The second saxophone bore down on him with outstretched hand.

"You don't remember me!"

"Of course I do," lied the artist.

"My daughter used to sit for you. Little Gina."

"Bless her heart! And her hips! What's happened to her?"

"Married a Member of Parliament."

"I knew she'd come to a bad end. And you're playing here? That's a move up?"

"Yes. But they don't dance like they did at the Palais!"

"There was a couple here to-day." Clay had found his chance. "You never saw better dancers."

He gave a word picture of the girl he sought. The second saxophone nodded. Yes, they didn't dance bad. But at the Palais there were twenty as good . . .

"Where did they sit?"

The waiter was clearing away the tea things from the table the musician indicated. Clay had time to see an amusement guide that lay open on the cloth. He hurried to the theatre ticket agency in the hall.

"I'm joining my friends at the theatre," he confided in the clerk. "I've forgotten which show they fixed."

A description of the pair followed. The man remembered them. Reference to his register revealed

that they had booked for His Majesty's. But they had only reserved two stalls.

"Yes, we take it in turns," declared the artist, and obtained the numbers of the seats.

"So that," sighed Clay as he left the hotel, "is that!"

In another two hours he would have run his quarry to earth. He would stroll into the stalls of His Majesty's and carry off the girl, safe if indignant, from under her captor's nose. Then back in Dolores to Blackmere.

With all his acumen Clay could not guess that at that moment the old car was undergoing a course of very special treatment. An urgent telephone call had sent a mechanic with a black beard and a shade over one eye to the garage where Dolores was kept. An authorization which purported to be signed by the owner to carry out certain obviously desirable repairs easily procured admission to the shed. While Clay was rewarding his success as a sleuth out of a litre bottle of brandy, a clink of hammer and wrench underneath the car indicated where the expert was busy. The fruits of his labour were to ripen in the course of the evening.

Ten minutes before the play was due to start, Clay took his stand in the vestibule of the theatre. The usual crowd of highbrows from the suburbs and lowbrows from the City flowed past him. Among the top hats and dress overcoats, Clay's red check ulster turned up to his chin and flat black sombrero hat

crushed on his forehead looked out of place. Presently the stream slackened, dried up. Soon the vestibule was empty but for Clay and a commissionaire. Hope and Bynion had not come.

The artist gave them five minutes' grace. A party of stockbrokers made a tardy and slightly flatulent entry. Desolation once more reigned. Had the couple slipped past unseen, had the theatre ticket clerk been mistaken, or—he refused to admit the thought—had something already happened to Hope?

He tugged at his beard. How could he pick up the trail he had lost? If the missing pair had meant to visit His Majesty's, where would they have dined? Since Bynion would wish to make a good impression, probably at the Carlton, next door! And since they would have been in day clothes, presumably in the Grill Room.

To the distress of the head waiter, a man wearing an ulster that would have stunned the whole of Savile Row strolled into the Carlton Grill and demanded a side table. Refusing to accept the assurance that those tables were all taken, he insisted on inspecting the reservation sheet.

Against table Number 7, Clay deciphered with delight the name of Mr. Bynion and the hour of 7.30 P. M.

"Number 8 will do!" he announced. "And bring me a double brandy."

One of Clay's few accomplishments outside the sphere of painting and detection was a knowledge of

Neapolitan. The waiter on table Number 8 fell an easy victim to the spell of his mother dialect. Gossip about the stringed instruments, wine shops, and *pastas* of the Queen of the Mediterranean led readily to a digression on the couple who had dined at table Number 7.

They had started dinner, it seemed, on very friendly terms; indeed, Roberto had guessed that they were *sposati*.

Clay banged on the table.

"No," he growled through his teeth, "they're not engaged!"

As the meal progressed, a quarrel started. With the best will in the world Roberto had been unable to gather the cause. When he inclined an attentive ear Bynion sent him for toast.

"You English are so secretive," sighed the Neapolitan.

"Never mind!" Clay looked pleased. "Anyhow, they quarrelled!"

The *signorino*, the waiter opined, had been too authoritative. The *signorina* seemed to like her own way. By the time coffee was served they were not speaking.

"Splendid!" ejaculated the painter.

Then a very handsome man, white hair, fine profile, gestures unlike an Englishman's, might be a *monsignore* . . .

"Brother Cosimo!" exclaimed Clay. "That's bad! What did he want?"

Roberto, who had been pouring out the coffee, was able to answer.

The newcomer had explained that he was stranded in London. His car was *en panne*, and the train would not get him to Blackmere in time for the Initiation at eleven. . . .

"What did he mean by the Initiation?" asked Roberto.

"Never mind. This is important!" Clay snapped.

The priest had seen Hope dining, and took the liberty to beg a lift back.

"But we're going to the theatre!" Bynion had expostulated.

"We're not!" Hope had corrected him. "After what you said!"

The waiter's expressive hands went out in a wide Neapolitan gesture.

"So the *signorino* was left to pay the bill, and the beautiful lady and the *monsignore* went off to find the car. . . ."

But eloquence is wasted in the barbarous north. Roberto's red-bearded friend had thrown down a handful of silver and had disappeared up the stairs. His business must have been urgent, for he left his glass of brandy untasted.

CHAPTER XXI

95 m. p. h.

A HURRIED telephone call to Scotland Yard confirmed the waiter's story. A car like Hope's had been reported by two patrols on the Southampton road. It seemed as if the Guide was heading for Blackmere, as he had professed. Hope's visit in Brother Cosimo's charge to the picture gallery was a foretaste of what might happen on the drive. Immediate high-speed pursuit was the only hope. If Dolores would hold the wet roads, and if her driver could steer her through the mists that lined the valleys, her speed might save Hope's life. Clay's calculation took no count of the handiwork of the mechanic with the eyeshade.

Affectionately the painter patted the battered body of the old racer as he poured a succession of tins of petrol into her voracious tank. She responded by consenting to an easy start. Water? A jugful, for boiling was one of her elderly vices. Oil? A quart. Top down and wind-screen up. Tires must take their chance. . . . The headlights flared, and Dolores roared out of the narrow mews.

Traffic is sparse between the filling and the emptying of the theatres, and down Piccadilly the needle of the speedometer stood steady at fifty.

At Hammersmith Broadway a callous bartender refused to serve a Mr. Wiggins. Meandering into the middle of the road Mr. Wiggins caused Clay to swear horribly, jam on his brakes, and skid round the wrong side of a refuge.

"Battle, murder, *and* sudden death!" remarked Mr. Wiggins as the tail lamp rocked down the street to Chiswick.

The Great West Road gave Clay his opportunity to shorten the lead that Hope's car had established. The red signal lamps at the crossroads winked wickedly as his speedometer crept from sixty-five to seventy. Dolores bucketed badly over a rough stretch of concrete, but her driver's foot did not let up the accelerator. Eighty . . . eighty-five . . . She passed a Rolls carrying a late-working business man or an early-working burglar as a greyhound passes a terrier. At ninety Dolores got into a wheel wobble. Ninety was her bad period. She had killed Antoine Fleury at that speed in the race for the Grand Prix of 1913. . . .

Fiercely Clay fought the wobble. The muscles of his thin wrists stood out as he struggled to correct the swing. For two seconds he lost control. The curb at the edge of the road rushed at him. He set his teeth and forced the accelerator farther down. The needle

quivered to ninety-five and Dolores settled into a more manageable gait.

Clay smiled. The reflection of the headlights on the concrete lighted his pale face. His red beard streamed in the wind. He had lost his deplorable hat. His body was shaken by the bucking of the racer, and each bump or pothole that sent her bouncing off the ground drove his teeth into his gums. But he knew he must be gaining on Brother Cosimo.

Where a side road crossed the Staines extension a wagon piled high with crates of Brussels sprouts for Covent Garden pulled slowly across the track. The sudden deflection of the steering wheel, required to avoid disaster, sent Dolores into an unmanageable skid. Round she whisked on the wet concrete. Three complete circles she fetched, ending with her tail in the direction of Southampton. The carter pulled his horses on their haunches; their sudden stop threw the crates of vegetables off their balance; down they toppled to the road, to burst like green bombs.

His association with the porters of the market had extended the wagoner's vocabulary. It rang lurid in Clay's ears as he entered Staines at a steady fifty.

At Virginia Water he ran into a thick bank of mist. Fortunately it rose from the ground, and the tops of the telegraph poles were visible. With a finger on the Klaxon and a prayer on his lips, Clay kept his speed and ploughed blindly through the cotton wool. Once his near wheel cut the turf at

the side of the road. He swung out and recovered the macadam. . . .

Close ahead of him he heard the anxious bleat of a car lost in the fog.

"If they're on my side of the road they're done for!" The certainty flashed across his mind. At that moment Dolores's bonnet emerged from the mist. Her headlights converged on an old Morris, directly in her path, driven by a clergyman, on his way to the bedside of some parishioner *in extremis*. If Clay's quickness of hand had not swung Dolores out and past on the wrong side of the road with three inches to spare the parson need have gone no farther for the deathbed.

Clay began to wonder if the car he was following must not have turned off the main road. At the pace of his progress, it could not be far ahead. Each red tail lamp that he sighted, chased, and overhauled raised hopes in his heart which his head lamps discredited when their beams lighted the back of a car strange in colour or shape.

The imaginative mind of the artist began to torment itself with pictures of what might be happening—what might have happened—to Hope. He forced it to concentrate on the incident of the road that unwound before his lamps. A patch where the leaves had fallen thick—*Slow a little and watch for the skid*. . . . Red blinds of a public house and a snatch of song half heard through the tightly shut window.

. . . White arms of a signpost—he *knew the road without*. . . . Puddle that reflected the sky—hear *the water rattle against her mudguards?* . . . Shuttered windows of a village—*God, what an hour to go to bed!* . . . Steeple keeping watch over tombstones. . . . Overhanging bough of a tree lighted up from below. . . . White rails of a bridge at a stream—*bump! took that too fast!* . . . Patch of mist rising from the stream. . . . *Brake hard for that corner. Nicely, on two wheels!* . . . So the miles wound on.

At last he reached the Hartfordbridge Flats. Ahead a tail lamp glowed. He had not overtaken a car for a quarter of an hour. The speed at which the red light moved was hopeful. He trod on the accelerator.

Nobly Dolores answered the call, but Clay did not feel his usual pleasure in her speed. His head had started to throb. He felt sleepy. He steered clumsily across two potholes. All the same, he was gaining. The red lamp was quite close now. Damn this headache! Funny sweet smell, or only imagination? That's nothing. Back of car visible. Same shape as Hope's. Too far to see the colour. What's wrong with Dolores? Can't hear her engine. But she's going all right! Catching that damned car. Blue car. Yes, that's Hope! Hope! Pass her and force her to slow up. What's wrong with the steering wheel? Nearly off the road then! Careful! Something funny with the lamps. All dim. Eyes wrong too. Hope's car all

hazy. No strength in hands. . . . One wheel off the road. . . . Won't come back. . . . Brakes . . . that's a gorse bush . . . ditch . . . Hope . . . Clay's body fell limply over the steering wheel, and for a little way Dolores ploughed unguided over the heather.

CHAPTER XXII

The Place of Whispers

As THE coffee-room clock at Blackmere Priory struck nine, a sturdily built man in a London suit sat down and ordered a grilled steak, a portion of apple tart, and a pint of Guinness.

The name that the new arrival had signed in the visitors' book that afternoon was Sidney J. Wright. His business, as he had told the circle of acquaintances he had already formed in the lounge, was concerned with wholesale dealing in underwear. But except that a short black coat and striped trousers replaced the familiar blue serge suit it would have been hard for anyone moving in police circles to distinguish Mr. Wright from Superintendent Heppel.

At nine-twenty the detective looked up from his plate and ordered another steak. The initiation ceremony was not due to start until eleven, but it was preceded at ten by the final preparation. The fictitious Mr. Wright had persuaded the cathedral authorities, on the plea of constant absences from the United Kingdom for reasons connected with underwear, to omit the preliminary course of prepar-

ation. A square meal would fortify him for the indispensable final stages that led up to presentation to the Leader in the Place of Whispers.

Half an hour later he was following a little band of seven candidates down the dark carriageway that led to the sanctuary. His hand was in his coat pocket and caressing implements he had brought to discover the Leader's identity.

The Gothic doors of the sanctuary were shut. Heppel looked up at the narrow pointed arch which the painter had found so sinister and congratulated himself that he lacked the artistic temperament. Why, the place was only an old ruined church! And the whole business—preparation, initiation, New Search—just so much flapdoodle!

Ten o'clock struck mournfully in the distance, and an old man in a green jade gown laboriously pushed open the heavy doors. His yellowish hand beckoned to the candidates to enter.

Heppel was the last of the group to pass the doorway. To his irritation the chapel was in darkness. A cold wind blew to meet him. He could see nothing. The feet of his companions scraped uneasily on the stone floor.

Some impulse moved him to look upward. Through the shattered roof he could see the stars. He felt the queerness of being indoors—with nothing between his head and stars that were a million miles away. Remote as they were, they must be no less real than the beefsteaks he had consumed at supper. Per-

haps it was not as easy as he thought to distinguish the unreal. . . .

He felt a touch on his shoulder. The verger was marshalling the group into a line and handing each man and woman a garment. His thin voice whispered a command to robe.

Heppel's experience of religious ceremony was limited to the sincere, if prosaic, proceedings of a branch of Primitive Methodists. He was unprepared for the more ritualistic leanings of the New Seekers. He was also conscious that his bald head and corpulent figure would not look their best in a voluminous silk vestment.

Out of the darkness, distinct but distant, came the sound of chanting. The tongue was unknown to the detective. It might have been Latin. Or again it might have been Bantu.

A procession emerged from a side chapel. Each of the ten priests that formed it wore a black hooded cope and carried a lighted candle. Of his person only eyes, gloved hand, and bare feet were visible.

The string of priests, candles flickering, voices droning, felt their way round the darkened sanctuary. Facing the line of candidates, they came to rest and silence. The hierophant at either end of the procession turned inward. The other eight raised gloved hands and beckoned. As each layman followed his confessor to a separate recess in the sanctuary wall, the two priests who were left behind started to intone in the unknown tongue a sequence of questions

and answers. Their mournful voices drowned the murmur from the eight confessionals.

The gloved hand signed to Heppel to be seated on a stone slab that stuck out from the wall. The hooded form settled itself in a chair carved with curious symbols. The candle guttered between the two silent men. Their eyes met. The detective was conscious of an attempt to dominate his will. He resisted it with all the strength of his phlegmatic nature. But with a shock he understood that he was menaced with something that he could not see, something in which he had refused to believe, but which was, nevertheless, as real as the stars he saw through the shattered roof or the glass of stout he had lifted from the white tablecloth.

Some moments passed before the black-robed confessor spoke. The detective was prepared to resist an attempt to unmask his assumed identity. But the circumstantial history of the life and actions of Sidney J. Wright that he had ready was wasted.

The questions that the deep bass asked were searching, but they searched his thoughts and his subconscious desires, not the facts of his everyday existence. His range of knowledge was not wide enough to tell him that he was being subjected by an expert to a profound and subtle course of psychoanalysis. Instinctively he resorted to evasive and ambiguous reply. But common sense and caution proved uncertain guides. Suppression of the truth revealed as much to his examiner as any direct answer. Silence,

his only safe refuge, was barred, since it might lead to exclusion from Initiation with all he hoped to learn.

So he submitted himself to a humiliating dissection of his personality. His most harmless aspirations hid unspeakable velleities; complexes of staggering perversion lurked behind habits that he had hitherto considered blameless or even benevolent; dreams that in his innocence had seemed laughable revealed tendencies that would disqualify for the paranoiac mess at Broadmoor Hospital. At the end of half an hour Heppel felt as if he were a watch that an ingenious boy has taken to pieces and has found to be a bomb. He wondered if he could ever be put together again.

The rain of questions, the flicker of the candle in the circumfluent darkness, the snakelike gaze through the eyeholes of the hood, began to take their effect on the detective's unimpressionable nerves. He began to feel a lust for confession, a need for self-abasement. In the Garden of Eden God is said to have taken earth to make Adam. To this day man enjoys a wallow in the mud from which he came.

Heppel found himself ready to volunteer the story of basenesses which in his span no man escapes. Little sins of his boyhood bubbled up through his memory. Little shames that he hoped had long passed into the oblivion of which science has robbed us presented themselves for revelation.

He licked his dry lips. His mouth opened. The priest pushed home the advantage.

"Tell me what is in your mind, Brother."

Heppel hesitated.

"Confide in me. Confession is the gateway of happiness."

For the first time the man had blundered. The word "confession" raised Heppel's nonconformist bristles. His habit of reticence swooped to the rescue. It was not to give himself away that he had visited this haunt of popery, this home of priestcraft.

The confessor must have sensed the reaction. He shifted his ground and began to proclaim the happiness that Initiation brought.

A single bell started to ring in the ruined tower. Heppel hoped that the period of preparation was over. He knew that he had nearly failed at the first test. Forces were brought to bear, subtler and more mysterious than any he had ever met. The dividing line between fact and flapdoodle was narrower than he had imagined. He congratulated himself that it was he who had to draw that line and not the imaginative artist. Clay's irregular life, the fanciful nature of his work, his reliance on instinct would have laid him at the mercy of these masters of the subliminal. Why, even that sight of the stars shining through the roof and the little cool wind in his face would have unbalanced the judgment of the temperamental artist! That sort of man could never look at the stars without beginning to wonder.

The detective could not guess that at that moment his friend was lying under the night sky on the Flats,

his face turned to the stars, his hair stirred by the wind, unconscious of any wonder.

The bell stopped. A thousand twinkling lights sprang up. In streamed the New Seekers for the Initiation ceremony. The voice of the psychoanalyst had ceased, and Heppel knew that the preparation was over. When due forms had been observed he would be brought before the unseen Leader in the Place of Whispers.

He watched the inflowing congregation. Some of its members he recognized as guests who were staying at the Priory; others must have come from afar. He looked in vain for Claud Bynion. He craned his neck for Hope Moreland, ignorant that the girl was driving the figurehead of this mysterious sect and that every milestone brought her nearer the death that had been prepared.

At last the stream of worshippers ceased. The verger in the green cassock allowed the doors to swing together. Reluctantly Heppel allowed himself to be manœuvred into his place in a procession of priests, acolytes, and candidates.

His red silk robe, which was a little too long for him, made him feel ridiculous. His principles were outraged by the waves of incense which rolled from the censer that a priest at the head of the line was swinging. He was glad that there were no brother Methodists to see. The thought made him glance at the congregation. He was surprised by their devotion.

No one smiled at the string of middle-aged, well-to-do men and women dressed up in scarlet silk, shepherded along the aisles by hooded figures.

Suddenly Superintendent Heppel shivered. There was something uncanny, unhealthy, in solemnity before a ludicrous spectacle. New Search was inhuman, humourless. All that was kindly, sincere, and reasonable in Heppel rose in protest. He forced himself to keep his place in the procession that plodded up the centre aisle toward a row of thrones raised on a dais.

Signing to their charges to be seated, the ten confessors bowed and withdrew. A boy of fifteen with the face of a Botticelli angel was fanning a silver brazier that stood before the double gates of ivory separating nave from choir. Thick white smoke rose, heavily perfumed.

Heppel's fatherly heart was stirred by the thin, pale face of the thurifer. Consumptive, probably, and those fumes the worst thing for him! How those fat women with pearls in the front pew gazed at the boy's unhealthy beauty, their morbid rapture batten- ing on the child's illness! Real women would have wanted to feed him up on hot milk. When rich people turned religious, how heartless they were apt to become! He believed that he had put his finger on the rottenness of the movement. A beautiful, sensuous body with gorgeous clothes and never a heart.

For five minutes the candidates sat, breathing the curious odour of the gums, lulled by the drone of the organ and the chanting of the priests, hypnotized

by the dazzle of innumerable candles, fitful in the night air that blew through the ruins.

The music stopped. Complete silence reigned. Silence and expectation. The ivory gates swung noiselessly open and revealed the Crystal Stair, a smaller replica of the flight in the Park Lane cathedral. At the top of the steps stood the plain black tabernacle where the Leader hid his face from the eyes of his followers. There was a rustle of movement, and every worshipper knelt. While they were on their knees, the voice of the Leader spoke.

"Come," it said in a beautiful, strange whisper that filled the building. *"Come, Seekers, to receive your happiness!"*

There was another silence. The congregation quietly rose from their knees. Then the voice spoke again.

"The first of the candidates."

From behind the gates two cowed figures advanced. Their gloved fingers touched the two hands of the Seeker who occupied the throne on the right, a Mr. Vincent Potts, a tea planter from Ceylon. They led him between them to the foot of the stairs.

The weird un-European music that Clay had twice heard breathed softly from the pipes of the great organ as Mr. Potts ascended the stairs in his scarlet silk gown.

But Heppel had no desire to smile. In his own nervous system he was fighting the forces that the priests of the New Search Movement had de-

ployed. The dissolution of his personality that the psychoanalysis had attempted, the influence of the elaborate ritual, the stupefying perfume that the boy was fanning in his face, the primordial appeal of the savage music—he was struggling against their domination. Automatically his hand sought his pocket. The cool touch of the implements that lay there lent him strength.

The tea planter had reached the top of the crystal steps and had been guided by a hooded janitor through the black curtains that draped the side of the shrine. The organ was playing very softly now, and, straining his ears, Heppel thought he could hear the murmur of voices inside the Place of Whispers. The boy at the brazier threw a handful of gums on the embers. A flame flickered, momentarily brilliant, and lighted the features of the congregation. Heppel covered his face with his hands in pretended prayer, and through the slits between his fingers he studied the expressions of the worshippers.

He learned little. Mrs. White, he thought, looked desperately anxious. No doubt because her niece had not returned. Colonel Webb stared stonily in front of him. Tom Curlew played with his watch chain. Miss Manfred's fine eyes were devoutly lowered. In the organ loft Nurse Lasken's white coif was visible. Her crippled charge's lips were moving in prayer as his fingers drew soft music from the keyboard. Claud Bynion was not in the chapel. Nor Brother Cosimo—unless a hood concealed his face.

Heppel's scrutiny was interrupted by the reappearance of Mr. Potts. As he issued from the tabernacle, the priest who guarded the door slipped a white gown over the red. The tea planter came down the crystal stairs purged, it is to be supposed, by contact with the unknown. His face was gray. His eyes might have been looking into the Pit. . . .

Five more candidates ascended the stairs, entered the tabernacle, and descended with faces pale as their robes, before Heppel felt a touch on his shoulder.

At last the opportunity for which he had schemed had arrived. He lowered himself from his throne. What was he about to see? Stories of men hideously disfigured rose before his mind. Well, they could not be worse than some of the sights his duty had shown him.

He jumped as gloved hands touched his and led him to the foot of the stairs. How all this hanky-panky worked on the imagination! Incense, priestcraft, hypnotism—oh, for a breath of fresh air! As he moved slowly up the diffused radiance of the stairs his simple heart was filled with loathing for the whole atmosphere of morbid trickery. Two steps from the top his foot slipped on the transparent surface. His indignation took a personal turn. Making a fool of a decent citizen by putting him in a scarlet silk robe and giving him glass to walk on! Why not a carpet, like any other staircase? He wished the whole business to blaze. He brushed irritably past the hooded

guardian, and the black velvet curtains fell behind him.

He found himself in an impenetrable, scented darkness. He was prepared for that. His fingers closed on the electric torch in his pocket. But he was not prepared for the sense of desolation and emptiness. . . . Then the Leader spoke.

"My son, open your heart to me."

Even the beauty of the voice could not master Heppel's resentment against the assumption of authority over him by the head of a sect that he disliked and distrusted. He could find no suitable reply.

"Banish restraint," went on the voice. *"Confess your inmost longings and have faith in our power to purge or fulfill them."*

Heppel hastened to proclaim his full confidence in the power of the invisible Leader.

"Yes, my son, we can lead you to the happiness that is your right and remove every obstacle that besets your path."

The darkness, thought the detective, was the principal obstacle. He pulled the torch out of his pocket.

"Pray, my son! Pray aloud for what your inmost heart desires!"

Heppel's mouth tightened. He would never be coerced into prayer by this suave, insinuating voice. But even as the muscles of his jaw set, he realized to his horror that he was praying. A prayer of hate it was, a prayer for the sudden destruction of this chapel and of everyone in it and for the annihilation

of the evil, distorted mind that had conceived the New Search Movement.

Everywhere a deathly silence reigned. It felt to Heppel that the universe was listening to his petition of hatred. Then the hush broke. In the distance he heard the hoot of a motor car. Before it had died away the organ pealed into the sacerdotal march that had so strangely affected his nerves. Unwittingly the organist had given Heppel the cloak of sound that he needed. He raised his flashlight to the ordinary level of a man's face and snapped the catch. The white beam was blinding. It fell on a curtain three feet from his hand. The compartment was empty of any presence but his own!

His surprise did not last. The speaker must be on the other side of the velvet curtain. Heppel drew a long clasp knife and slashed. But the Leader was as well prepared as the man who had vowed to surprise his secret. The velvet was reinforced with a small-meshed steel netting. The knife was as useless as a wooden dagger.

The weird music sank to a whisper. Heppel wondered if the Unseen had heard the knife on the netting. To disarm suspicion he began a rigmarole of prayer that meant nothing. His sentences were never finished.

From outside the Place of Whispers, outside the ruined sanctuary, distinct through the shattered walls, rose the scream of some mortal in deadly fear. Three times Heppel heard the cry. The anguish

seemed to grow with each repetition. The last scream was cut short, as if a hand had been clapped over the sufferer's mouth—was it the hand of Death?

The detective did not hesitate. He dashed out of the tabernacle, pushing the janitor aside, and ran down the Crystal Stair. As he reached the door of the chapel he noticed that the strange un-European melody was still throbbing.

CHAPTER XXIII

Found Drowned

IN THE drive outside the sanctuary stood a line of cars. Their chauffeurs were stretching their necks and pointing in the direction of the lake.

"Gawd!" exclaimed the driver of a Daimler in Heppel's ear. "Did you hear those yells?"

Swallowing his surprise at the detective's costume, he offered a lift to the place from which the screams had come. As the car gathered way he gave a little shiver.

"Sounded like a gurl!"

Heppel did not answer. He was praying that the man might be wrong.

Their head lamps picked up the back of a man running. He dropped off the crown of the road to let the car pass. He was wearing a green baize apron, and Clay would have recognized him as the shabby little Communist he had saved from the crowd in Hyde Park.

"There's one in a 'urry!" commented the driver of the Daimler.

Heppel did not answer. He was busy extricating himself from the detested scarlet gown. The car

swung round a curve, and its passengers came in sight of the two lighted lamp posts that marked the beginning of the Priory drive.

"She can't have been much further," stated the chauffeur. "Those yells were loud and clear enough. A damn sight too clear for my sleep to-night!"

He stopped the car to let Heppel out. The superintendent peered into the darkness. No sound came from the lake. The air was dank, and a ground mist was rising.

"Swing your car," Heppel directed, "so that the lamps throw their beam on the lake."

The driver obeyed. The mist reflected back the light. Only a few yards of the water were illuminated.

Several more cars drove up. From one of them sprang Mrs. White. Her face was very pale.

"Who was that screaming?" she breathed. "For God's sake!"

"We are trying to find out," said Heppel.

He made the queue of cars turn in line with the Daimler.

The combined beams pushed back the mist. The length of a cricket pitch from the shore something curved like the back of a whale rose out of the iron-gray water.

"Gawd!" said Heppel's driver again. "It's the top of a saloon!"

Heppel turned to him.

"Is there a boat?"

"You're arsking!" The man shrugged his shoulders. "This ain't my lake!"

Mr. Curlew, already on the scene, suggested the wherry that rotted in the margin of the lake. Heppel hid his irritation.

"Something that will float," he particularized. He had already taken off his coat and was preparing to swim, when the man in the green apron stated that he knew where a punt was moored. He offered to fetch it.

"Is the ceremony over?" Heppel asked of Mrs. White.

In an incoherent whisper, she told him that it had been suspended. The Guide, whose duty it was to administer the oath of Initiation, had not appeared. The ceremony would be finished the next night.

The sound of a pole, dipped and withdrawn, announced the arrival of the punt. Heppel and the chauffeur embarked. As the boat put out Mrs. White scrambled after them.

"I won't wait," she protested. "I daren't!"

A few thrusts of the pole brought them to the side of the submerged saloon. Heppel switched on his flashlight.

"Oh, Hope, Hope!" cried the woman's tortured voice. "It's her car!"

Heppel shook his head gloomily. He too had recognized the blue saloon. He felt a strong reluctance to probe its mystery. But he had his duty to perform. He scrambled from the punt to the domed top. The

car rocked a little under his weight. Once more his fingers sought the clasp knife that the steel and velvet curtain had baffled. It ripped easily into the blue fabric of the saloon. In three minutes he had torn a hole a foot long. He lowered his arm, torch in hand, into the interior of the fatal car. For a moment he could not bring himself to press the button that would release the beam on—he did not like to think on what.

The catch slipped beneath his reluctant thumb. From under the green water a white face with dreadful, staring dead eyes looked up at the white cone of light.

Aunt Mina fainted.

CHAPTER XXIV

Dolores to the Front

THE Hartfordbridge Flats were lighted by the stars. Clay opened his eyes. At first he had no idea where he was or what had happened. He knew that he must do something or reach somewhere for Hope's sake. Hope was the only fixed point in a universe that reeled and oscillated. She was a star like those in the sky. But constant, not pitching and rotating.

Why did his hands grip a steering wheel? Why were his feet at a higher level than his head? He lowered his eyes from the vertiginous firmament. Why was Dolores standing on her tail? Memory of the accident returned. He had caught up with Hope, and then . . . He moved to investigate the state of the car. The action sent an arrow of pain across his head. His hand came away without trace of blood. He understood that he was suffering from the effects of dope. For a moment he laid the blame on the waiter at the Carlton and the brandy. But he had left his glass untasted. Gas? Introduced into the car? That was possible. Disregarding the pain that seemed to scalp him, he climbed out of the almost vertical chassis. Dolores had come to rest with her back

axle in a ditch and her front wheels in the air. The full length of her exhaust pipe was indecently exposed. The light of one of the side lamps, twisted askew but still burning, revealed the recent scratch of a chisel on the metal. Something had been fixed where the heat of the exhaust would reach. A gas might have been generated and have risen through the footboards. If he had not lowered the top . . . ! But there was no time to investigate the method of the diabolical attempt. The immediate necessity was to get Dolores on the road and once more in pursuit.

It was odds that the engine was damaged. How could he turn the starting handle at that angle? He reached up and caught the bumper. Hanging with all his weight on the front of the car, he felt a movement. What luck that the chassis was so near its turning point on the fulcrum of the mound! He exerted all his strength and weight, and slowly the car tipped downward. The impetus carried the back wheels against the mound. Clay seized the starting handle and, setting his teeth against the pain in his scalp, he swung the engine violently.

The music of the spheres could have sounded no sweeter than the answering roar from the cylinders. Clay leaped into the driver's seat, raced the engine, and banged in the clutch. The hind wheels found just enough purchase against the mound to kick the car forward to a grip on the sandy, heather-grown waste. Dolores struggled, creaking and bumping over the heath, back to the road.

Clay carried no clock in the car, and his watch lived at the pawnbroker. He did not know how long had elapsed since his head lamps had lighted the back of Hope's car. With anxious eyes and set lips he took the straight black road at the full speed the hundred horsepower would give.

For the twenty minutes that followed Clay drove like a fiend. He was completely reckless of his life, and, it must be admitted, of the life of anyone who might have the misfortune to cross his path. To increase the danger, the accident had affected his headlights. They flickered like an early cinematograph. Contact with the ditch had disconnected the exhaust, and red flashes of flame spirted from the bowels of the car. Bareheaded, wild haired, and wild bearded, eyes bloodshot, bolt upright, and buttoned to the throat in his ulster, lighted by an illumination as insane as a Catherine wheel or St. Elmo's fire, Clay crashed across the English countryside like something out of Norse mythology.

Soon after he had turned off the main London road and had entered the lanes that made obliquely for Blackmere, he came into sight of the red eye of a tail lamp. Indifferent to the hazards of the narrow winding road he called on Dolores for an effort. A few moments later even the delirious fulguration of her lamps could not conceal that for a second time Hope's car had been overhauled. If only the girl was alive and safe inside that muddled saloon!

The roar of Dolores's exhaust was reinforced by

the blare of her Klaxon. Flickering her lamps, spitting flames a foot long, with one wheel on the margin of the ditch, Dolores forced her way past the car she had chased so far and so desperately. When she had gained half a dozen lengths, her driver extended a lean arresting arm and swung her broadside across the lane.

The following car came slithering to a stop. Clay stood on his seat and peered into the dark body of the saloon. Was he too late?

A light switched on. Clay could have shouted with joy as the oval of Hope's face appeared, flanked by the classical profile of the Guide. He thought of the heads of two saints engraved on a sacred medal.

He wasted no time in adoration. He jumped to the ground and pulled at the handle of the door.

"Come along," he called peremptorily.

"Lucien!" cried the girl. "Why do you look so funny?"

"Never mind my looks," he snapped. "Get out of that car and into Dolores!"

"Don't," she bade him. "You're frightening me!"

"Less of the shrinking female," was Lucien's unfeeling comment. "I'm wise to you now."

"Are you mad?"

He shook the door. It resisted his efforts.

"It's jammed!" protested Hope. "It doesn't matter. I promised to take the Guide back to the sanctuary. Move your car, Lucien, or he'll be late for the Initiation."

"We ought indeed to be moving on." Brother Cosimo consulted his watch.

"You'll either come with me," the painter told Hope, "or spend the night in the lane."

"Is that a threat?"

"No, a precaution!"

In spite of herself the girl was impressed by the dead earnest of Clay's tones.

"It's so cold in Dolores!"

"It's colder in your grave."

Clay made the statement as if he were remarking that rain threatened. Hope shivered.

Clay put his lips close to the lowered window. He ignored the protest of the faint, clean smell of lavender water.

"Haven't I twice saved your life?" he whispered. "The third attempt may succeed."

She weakened.

"But Dolores only takes two. How will the Guide get there?"

"Walk!" said Lucien.

"Five miles? In the dark? He's late already."

Clay addressed himself to the man whose eloquence could sway a packed cathedral.

"Can you drive a car?"

"I had lessons once," began Brother Cosimo doubtfully.

"Good!" snapped the artist. "Get on with it!" He pushed the window to the bottom of its run

and signed to Hope to clamber through the gap. She made a half-hearted attempt.

"My dress is too long. I'll catch my foot!"

Clay forgave the futility. It gave him an excuse to offer his bony arms.

"I'll hold you!"

Why were the words so pleasant to say?

For a moment he felt the soft curves of her body in his arms. He wondered if she liked the intimacy as much as he did. Her next words enlightened him.

"Gracious, it's cold! Can't I go on in my car?"

He set her down with a bump.

"I wonder why I bother about you!"

He drove slowly and in silence down the lane. The saloon followed. It appeared that Brother Cosimo's teacher had been competent.

At a crossroads stood the Bag o' Nails. To pass an inn went against the grain of Clay's principles.

"You'll get warm here," he assured his companion.

"A public house!" Her nostrils puckered.

But Clay had stopped the car and was waving to Brother Cosimo to follow suit. The priest shook a disapproving head, and soon his car was out of hearing.

"He knew that we have only two minutes to closing time!" was Clay's cynical explanation.

CHAPTER XXV

The Lake Mystery

CLAY led the way into the parlour. The *doyen* of the Old Age Pensioners' Association was dreaming over an empty tankard. The painter borrowed five-pence from Hope.

"There's time, if you're quick!" He pressed the coppers into the old man's palm.

With an anticipatory wipe of toothless lips the elder tottered into the bar.

"Now we can talk!" sighed Clay. "In these days one must suspect every outward sign of excellence."

"Have you brought me to this pothouse for a talk?" Hope protested.

"No." Lucien signalled to the landlord. "For a drink!"

He reached out his hand to take the offered glass, as he added: "And to get clear of Brother Cosimo!"

Hope pouted.

"I think you're very uncharitable. He's been telling me all about work in the East End."

"What did Bynion tell you?"

Hope blushed.

"Oh, Claud! At first he was angelic. He wanted to

help with our exhibition. The Guild of Youth, you know."

"I do know," Clay sighed.

"For a long time he was ever so nice. But when we were dancing, he started—well, I suppose he was trying to propose!"

"Damn his neck!" growled Clay. "What did you say?"

"Well, men take that sort of thing so seriously, don't they? And I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I think first love is sacred, don't you? So I didn't quite know what to say. But I think he must have read more into my answer than I meant!"

"That's what Cleopatra said about Antony," Clay remarked.

"Well, anyhow he started to order me about just as if we were married already. Worse than you do."

She gave the painter a quick look. An idea seemed to cross her mind for the first time. She looked at him again and was silent.

"Well?" prompted Clay.

She put her thoughts from her.

"So I was quite glad when Brother Cosimo wanted a lift home. I thought that would teach Claud a lesson."

"I'm going to give *you* a lesson!" Clay's beard bristled. "I'm going to ask Heppel for a big policeman to watch you every moment of the day and to sleep outside your door at night. No more slipping off to London when I'm not looking."

Hope giggled uneasily.

"That's a joke, isn't it?"

"I'll tell you when I make a joke," retorted Clay.

"Did you ever hear of Heber?"

"Heber the Kenite?" asked Hope, who knew her Bible.

"Heber the Bishop. A man with a gloomy view of life.

"Death rides on every passing breeze; he lurks in every flower;
Each season has its own disease, its peril every hour."

That's how things looked to Bishop Heber. That's how they are looking to me!"

"What happened to Bishop Heber?"

"He died of apoplexy in his bath at Calcutta. He hadn't thought of that."

Hope pointed out that it would not have rhymed.

"Anyhow, it showed how right he was. And I'm there to see that doesn't happen to you."

"In my bath!" said Hope pertly.

The landlord intervened with threats of the vigilance of the Blackmere policeman. Clay rose reluctantly to his feet.

"If the police would catch the murderer, instead of harrying a chap who wants a glass of beer five minutes after hours——" he began.

Hope interrupted.

"Would you give up drink—if I asked you?" she murmured.

Clay looked the prospect in the face.

"By God!" he swore. "I believe I would!"

Surprise at his infatuation kept him silent for the five miles that Dolores ate between the Bag o' Nails and Blackmere Lake. Sight of a group on the shore brought on his brakes. The shape of the burden in the men's arms made him anxious to hurry Hope out of eyeshot. But he dared not send her home alone.

She solved the difficulty.

"Look!" She gripped his arm. "The man in the green apron. That's the Communist!"

"The very man!" said Clay ambiguously. To his companion's amazement, he beckoned.

"Will you take this young lady," he said surprisingly, "to the hotel. Don't stop on the way. Take her straight to her room. Search every inch. Bar the shutters. Then stay on guard outside the door till I come."

But Hope was plucking at his sleeve.

"Are you mad, Lucien? I won't be safe with a Communist. Don't you remember the pistol he was wearing?"

Clay turned to the man in the green apron.

"Have you another?"

The little man grinned and slapped his hip pocket.

"Don't hesitate to use it!" the painter admonished.

"I'm going to scream," Hope announced.

"Don't. Meet Sergeant Biggin of the C. I. D."

"Sergeant——!"

"He was on special duty seeing if the Communists

were connected with this batch of murders," Lucien explained. "That's why we met him in Hyde Park. I spotted the genus 'busy' at a glance."

He followed the couple up the drive with his eyes, until they had disappeared into the darkness. Then he joined the group on the shore.

Heppel held his bowler hat in his hand. He looked up as Clay's foot scrunched the sand.

"Another accident!" The detective's voice was very grave.

"Who is it now?" The question came quickly.

"The last we would have expected. Brother Cosimo." Heppel passed his hand across his eyes. "And two minutes before he drove into the lake I was praying for the death of the man who invented the New Search! May God forgive me."

"He has less to forgive in you than in me." Soberly Clay recounted how he had sent Cosimo to his end.

"You can't be blamed." The detective was staring at the lake. "The whole thing is inexplicable. He seems to have driven his car steadily and deliberately into the water."

Heppel left a doctor to the hopeless attempt to restore animation and led the painter to the edge of the drive. His torch flashed.

"Look at the wheel tracks. They head straight, without swerve or wobble, into the lake. He made no attempt to take the curve."

The chauffeur of the Daimler was listening. He reminded the speaker of the darkness and the mist.

"There may have been a bit of moisture on the glass. He wouldn't see much."

Heppel pointed to the two lighted lamp posts that marked the direction of the drive.

"He'd see those. He couldn't help himself."

"Was there a smell of gas in the car?" Clay had good reason to ask the question. Heppel shook his head.

"I'm afraid the poor devil was fully conscious. Though whether he was in his right senses . . . The bottom of the lake shelves steeply here. Before the car had lost impetus it was nearly submerged. The water started to pour in. As the car filled he gave three dreadful screams. Then the water reached his open mouth."

"How did you get him out?"

The detective explained that they had to rip up the top of the saloon. The body was in the position that Death had perpetuated, tugging at the handle that was jammed.

Clay's hands went out in a gesture of pity.

"If he had come with me into the inn . . ."

He did not finish the sentence.

"We can do nothing till morning."

Side by side the detective and the painter walked back to the hotel. Behind them six bearers carried the mortal remains of him they called the Guide, who had played on the hearts of men as a virtuoso on a violin.

CHAPTER XXVI

Jack-o'-Lantern

CLAY was notoriously unable to face a normal breakfast. He waited impatiently in the lounge while Heppel dealt with the greater part of a pound of sausages. The detective's *alias* of Sidney J. Wright, wholesale dealer in ladies' underwear, and the myth of a casual acquaintance had to be preserved.

At last the marmalade gave out, and Heppel, pipe in hand, strolled into the lounge. The seat beside Mr. Wentworth's wheel chair was empty. Heppel found the scientist in poor spirits. He admitted that the death of Brother Cosimo had depressed him.

"He was a friend?" sympathized the superintendent.

Wentworth sighed. "I was very fond of poor Cosimo. He counted for so much in my spiritual life."

Uncomfortably reminded of his prayer Heppel agreed that the New Search Movement owed the dead priest a great deal.

John Wentworth embarked on a eulogy of his work and life.

"I must admit though," he added, "that my distress is partly selfish."

He glanced round the room. It was empty save for Clay drumming on the glass of the French window.

"These accidents," he whispered. "I'm so defenceless. And everyone thinks I'm rich."

Heppel tried to reassure him.

The white fingers were picking at the rug that covered the shrunken knees. "It brings the danger home. Within a few hundred yards of where I was sitting!"

Heppel laid his hand kindly on the old man's shoulder.

"We have no grounds to suppose," he stated, "that Brother Cosimo's death was not the purest accident."

The cripple shook his head.

"I'm going to ask for police protection," he confided.

The detective approved of the precaution. His hand was searching the pockets of his black coat.

"Excuse me!" He approached Clay. "A match?"

The painter barely turned from his study of the view. He remarked that Mr. Wright was looking ill.

"I slept badly."

"Cosimo?"

"In a way." He hesitated. The match went out in his fingers. "Mr. Clay, do you believe that prayers are answered?"

The vermilion eyebrows arched.

"You have to take your choice. Either a just God

or One you can get round. For my part, I'd rather the second and more humane variety. Why?"

Heppel told him of the question in the Place of Whispers. Of his horror of the whole system and his nerve-racked desire for the destruction of the power which had created that worship.

"You'd call that a prayer?" he asked.

"Certainly!"

"While the wish was in my mind Cosimo gave his death-scream." The little detective paused impressively. "I'm a religious man in my way, Mr. Clay. It looks to me as if my prayer was answered—rather terribly. That is why I couldn't sleep."

"Answer to prayer," mused Clay. And then the words he had uttered found their echo in his memory. "Anathoth!"

A reflection in the glass warned him to divert the conversation. "Talking of the efficacy of prayer, Mr. Wright," he hurried on, "a subject which naturally interests you as a New Seeker——"

The rubber tires of John Wentworth's wheel chair had been inaudible on the Wilton carpet.

"When I was a boy," the cripple volunteered, "I had a striking example of how prayer is granted. It would take too long to tell you now. Some other time perhaps."

The three men embarked on a theological discussion. At last the sun appeared from behind a cloud and gave Clay the excuse he wanted.

"What about a stroll, Mr. Wright?" he asked.

He turned to the scientist. "I wish you could join us!"

The cripple sighed.

"I have my aquarium," he said with a plucky smile.

Ten minutes later the two investigators stood on the shore of the fatal lake. They were watching the labours of the local police to salve the blue saloon which had entered the water a little to the right of the half-sunken wherry. Heppel had finished a summary of his experiences at the Initiation ceremony. He pointed at the water.

"This accident is true to type. Clearly the latest of the series. A distinguished victim. A perfectly staged catastrophe. Not a single suspicious circumstance."

"Except its air of studied innocence," agreed Lucien.

"But," continued Heppel, "we now know where to look for the motive. Mr. Curlew's large and surreptitious payment to Brother Cosimo; the mysterious word that was typed in his office; the discovery of cyanide in his possession—everything points in the same direction. And now this fatality, so convenient for the preservation of the dangerous secret, so opportune. . . ."

Lucien adjured his friend to avoid the snares of eloquence. They had ruined, he declared, many a good girl.

"What you suggest is this. Curlew poisoned old Bynion. Under the influence of the tricks you ex-

perienced last night, he confessed the murder to the priests. The buck priest Cosimo blackmailed him to the tune of twenty thousand pounds. Curlew paid with a smile on his face and the determination in his heart to stop the leak. Last night he stopped it for good. Is that your idea?"

Heppel hedged with the proviso that he was only suggesting a theory. The first step was to find out how Cosimo was induced to drown himself.

Clay's long forefinger tapped his friend's stomach.

"You're safer when you stick to facts," he grunted. "Leave the theories to me. You told me that Curlew was in the chapel, that the only one missing was Bynion."

Meekly the superintendent suggested that it was possible to bait a trap that would go off in the absence of the hunter.

"That trick with the cyanide, for instance," he hinted. "One would say that an alibi was our murderous friend's speciality."

"One for you, Heppel!" admitted the artist generously. "But if my theory is right, we are not dealing with a trap laid for the deceased cleric."

By now the police and their helpers had dragged the fatal saloon to the shore. Heppel scribbled a line and handed it to the sergeant in charge. He did not wish to be connected with the investigations.

For an hour Heppel and Clay appeared to form part of the crowd of sensation hunters who had gath-

ered at the scene of the tragedy, while the little knot of police turned the car inside out and upside down. The sergeant stood by, taking notes on the issue of each perquisition.

Under the screen of a newspaper the superintendent read the slip that was handed him.

"No trace of any mechanism for releasing gas," he muttered. "No defect in the steering gear. All controls in perfect order. Engine in perfect order. No nonstandard fittings of any kind." He folded the paper and put it in his wallet.

"And the body?" asked Clay. "Have you had a report?"

"Death by drowning." Heppel shrugged his shoulders. "No foreign substances discovered. No signs of violence. Everything in order everywhere."

"Not quite," said the painter thoughtfully.

He refused to tell his friend the exception.

"Wait," he commanded. "Leave your bits of iron and steel or flesh and blood for a moment. Remember the man's character."

The detective looked puzzled.

"More in your line than mine, Mr. Clay."

"Very well." Clay held up a didactic finger. "Brother Cosimo (whose real name I am told was Albert Sneed) was a hard-boiled materialist. I studied him pretty closely. He looked at life from underneath. You had only to hear one of his sermons. He knew what fools men are and how to turn their folly to his profit. He never took a chance, never

made a bet, never dreamed a dream. He kept on velvet, on bedrock fact all the time. Unless he was sure of a rock-bottomed, gilt-edged, five-per-cent. certainty he stood pat.

“A primrose by the river’s brim
A yellow primrose was to him . . .

That wasn’t half enough for Brother Cosimo. To him it had to be ‘an early-flowering plant of the genus *Primula* (*P. vulgaris*), closely allied to the cow-slip’!”

“My dear Mr. Clay!” protested Heppel. “Aren’t we a little off the point?”

“We’re bang on it, as you’d know, if you weren’t deaf, blind, *and* cretinous!” Clay was ever impatient of interruption. “What, I ask you, was the rock-bottom certainty that induced the deceased materialist to drive a car of his own free will into seven foot of water?”

“‘Of his own free will,’ ” repeated the superintendent. “Isn’t that rather a lot to assume?”

“It’s the only assumption that will cover the facts your men have ascertained—and the fact they’ve missed.”

“Which is?”

Without answering Clay led the way to the wheel marks that headed from the road to the lake.

“There was some excuse for missing that in the ‘dark,’ ” he admitted. “Any fool can see by daylight.”

Heppel stooped over the straight, unfaltering tracks.

"You'd say that owing to the mist he didn't know he was off the road," the comment came at last.

"Exactly. Why?"

"The ground's no softer than the road; there was no gutter to warn him."

"Intelligence almost human!" scoffed the painter.

"And except on these twenty yards or so of road, there *is* a gutter and a ridge to warn him. Providential—for the murderer!"

"You're suggesting that the edge of the road had been levelled on purpose." Heppel shook his head gloomily. "You've forgotten those inconvenient facts."

He pointed to the two wrought-iron lamps that stood on either side of the drive.

"Their light was visible in spite of the mist," he pointed out. "Brother Cosimo would steer by them."

Clay's reply surprised the superintendent, who should have been used to his vagaries.

"It's too cold to paddle," he remarked.

Heppel offered no opposition to that judgment.

"But you policemen are a hardy race," grinned the artist. "Suppose you told one of your chaps to wade through the mud to that boat?"

"What for?"

"For a look at the mast."

Heppel stared at the depressing relic. He gave a low whistle.

"That's an idea!" He indulged in a lugubrious wink. He made a quick sign to a red-faced constable and murmured instructions. The man blew out his cheeks. He had the countryman's distrust of the fancies of the metropolis.

Mud squelched round his regulation boots as he splashed his way to the wherry. A bit of rotten board broke in his hand where he swung his leg over the side. He examined the leaning mast critically.

"I doubt it'll carry me," he drawled across the few feet of water. Heppel's only answer was to jerk his thumb upward.

The mast creaked complainingly as the man's ponderous limbs embraced it. He swarmed slowly, pausing every foot to peer at the wood. When he was a yard from the top, he stopped. Taking a firmer grip with his legs, he freed one hand cautiously and tugged at something in the wood. Fingers failing, teeth were tried. The resistance was overcome and some small object came away. It was carefully transferred to a trouser pocket.

The constable turned his head, ruddier than ever for his exertions. It might have been a November sun. Heppel raised his hand. The man fumbled in his tunic. A large red handkerchief was bound round the place where his teeth had been at work.

With a loud crack, the mast indicated that its endurance was exhausted. The constable slid hurriedly to the deck. He splashed through the water, examining his palms for splinters.

"Well?" demanded Heppel impatiently.

The man held out an ordinary galvanized staple, such as ironmongers sell by the pound.

Heppel stared at the little hoop of metal.

"It had not had time to get rusty," he remarked to Clay.

The painter nodded.

"You notice the level?" he asked, and jerked his beard toward the bandana.

Heppel was smiling with pleasure.

"They must have been in a hurry," he rubbed his hands together, "to leave that staple. Do you think they may have abandoned the rest of the installation?"

Lucien shrugged his shoulders.

"It's rule of thumb now."

The constable stood spreading a little puddle in the drive. Heppel turned again to him and spoke at some length. The man stripped off his tunic, hung it in the fork of a tree, and made with more alacrity for the wherry. There seemed to be something in these London notions.

This time he did not board the boat. He worked slowly round her paintless hull, his arms submerged to the elbow in liquid mud.

At last he found what he sought. He bent and tugged with both hands plunged below the surface. He staggered and nearly sat down in the water. A dollop of black mud flew up into his face. He wiped

his eyes with the back of his arm and waded ashore, holding something that trailed.

Heppel met him at the edge. The policeman offered the end of a length of the double, insulated wire, that electricians use.

"Freshly cut with pliers," declared the detective after a momentary inspection.

"It runs under water," said the constable.

Heppel gave him orders to follow the wire to its source, using the punt if it led into deep water. He watched the man start along the margin of the lake in the direction of the Priory buildings, paying in the slack as he went. Then the superintendent turned to Lucien.

"We're up against a genius in murder," he said grimly. "But you're his match, Mr. Clay."

The painter was rolling a dishevelled cigarette.

"It was common sense once I had noticed that the gutter had been filled in at the point where the car left the road. Someone had prepared that spot for the accident. But, you pointed out, with the lights of twin lamp posts to steer by, no one with eyes in his head, ground mist or none, could fail to take the corner."

Heppel nodded.

"Suppose, however," the painter continued, "that the right-hand lamp was conveniently extinguished! And that even more conveniently Jack-o'-Lantern gleamed the breadth of the drive away on the *left* of the old left-hand lamp!"

The superintendent's eyes were bright.

"Would not the apparent course of the road be shifted a few yards to the west? And if there was a ground mist to hide the water, and if there was no gutter to give a warning bump, how should a driver know that he was off the real road and heading between phantom lights to his death?"

"Devilish!" murmured the superintendent.

"Devilish clever!" corrected Clay. "My next step was to discover how Jack-o'-Lantern could be persuaded to appear just when he was wanted. Might not an electric bulb fixed to the right height on the mast of the boat have done the trick? For the boat had been sunk a few yards to the left of the left-hand lamp post. The same switch that lighted the mast-head lamp could be made simultaneously to extinguish the globe of the right-hand lamp post. If the wire that connected the switch with the bulbs were long enough, the murderer might sit at his ease at—— But I must not go too fast."

"You thought then," said Heppel, "that Mr. Curlew——"

"I knew," replied Clay severely, "that Brother Cosimo had been led, by the cast-iron certainty of two steadily burning lights that appeared to mark his road, into the lake."

He paused to puff at his cigarette, which was burning unevenly.

"It still remained," he added, "to find some facts to support my theory. That of course was your job.

We could only hope that our man, or his agents, working in a hurry, and probably in the dark, to obliterate the details of his device, had left some trace of the fitting. Your rubicund friend was lucky enough to find the staple that had held the socket of the globe to the mast. His handkerchief showed us that its level corresponded with the height of the lamp post. It was unlikely that there would have been time to wind in the full length of wire, which, if my suspicions are right, must be considerable. Again Smiling Dawn proved me right. I shall be very much surprised if he is not now returning to tell us where the thread of Ariadne has led him."

Heppel did not speak until the constable had recovered his breath. He may have been wondering whether Ariadne was someone in the electrical trade.

"Well," he asked. "Where did you find the end of the wire?"

The man's face was paler than when he had set off.

"It led," he whispered, "to the crypt of the chapel!"

CHAPTER XXVII

Clay's Way With Women

CLAY smiled complacently.

"The doors of the chapel were locked?"

The constable nodded. Heppel smoothed his baldness and pondered.

"I don't want to do anything to alarm our man," he said. "We haven't proved the case. Curlew was not the only New Seeker at the service."

Lucien's thin hand was tugging at his beard.

"Wait for to-night's ceremony. You, in the person of Mr. Wright, will be able to attend. Open a window and I'll join you. Meanwhile—" he jerked his head toward the policeman—"your friend must change his trousers, and I must let out Hope."

The superintendent raised his eyebrows.

"I locked her in her bedroom." Clay's tone was casual. "I didn't want another chase. I stood Biggin outside the door. She's safe enough—but possibly a little impatient."

Heppel coughed.

"I wouldn't care to try that on Mrs. Heppel!"

His misgivings were justified. As the painter turned the key a little fury confronted him.

"What do you think you're doing? I won't be treated in this outrageous way! You're hateful!"

Clay shrugged his shoulders. It was her fault for giving him the slip the day before.

"Why shouldn't I? You're not my father!"

The words hurt more than was meant. Clay saw that in her eyes he might be.

"Never mind that," he said. "You need exercise. You'll be safe with me and Biggin."

The dark eyes opened their widest.

"Do you think I'll walk between a detective and a jailer? I won't budge!"

"Or we can sit here." Clay was accommodating.

"In my bedroom? Are you mad? If you want to know, I'm going to find Claud Bynion——"

"I thought you'd quarrelled."

"We had. But he's less intolerable than you. And take him for a drive."

Clay grinned maliciously.

"There are two objections to that!" He counted them on two lank fingers. "Since you gave him the bird in London, Claud Bynion hasn't put in an appearance——"

Hope interrupted angrily.

"Naturally, with your horrible suspicions hanging over his head!"

The painter held up the second finger.

"And, until an hour ago, your car was at the bottom of Blackmere Lake!"

In a few words, moderating the horror of the catastrophe, he told her of Brother Cosimo's end.

She bit her lip.

"Don't!" she pleaded. "Why, I was with him five minutes before!"

"That's the point," said Clay.

"But who would want to kill him?"

"It hasn't struck you," Clay spoke very distinctly, "that the trap was not laid for Cosimo? It was your car. If Dolores had not caught up, you would have been in the driver's seat!"

She shivered.

"I always hated the look of Blackmere."

"So am I asking too much if I suggest that you pass the day in my company?"

Hope held out both hands.

"I'm a beast. I owe you everything. Forget what I said!"

Clay touched the cool fingers. For a second his cynical pose had vanished.

"My dear," he said, "it's natural enough. I'm an old man. Claud Bynion is a young one. It's understandable that you should prefer his company. Only, believe me, at the moment mine—or even Sergeant Biggin's—is safer."

His sincerity impressed the girl.

"I'll do whatever you say. And—you know it—I *am* grateful! I like you awfully."

The moment of expansion was interrupted by Miss Banner, the manageress. The chambermaid,

she stated, had reported that the plaster was falling over Miss Moreland's bed. It appeared that Number 27 had let his bath overflow. The workmen would have to be called in. Would Miss Moreland mind changing her room for a night or two?

"Who," asked Clay, "is Number 27?"

Miss Banner looked severely through her pince-nez. She did not like Bohemians.

"I suppose there's no harm in telling you that it is Mr. Curlew," she said acidly.

"None!" confirmed Clay, and added that he would like to see the new room intended for Miss Moreland.

"Really!" sniffed Miss Banner.

"Won't it look rather odd?" protested Hope feebly.

"Not as odd as you'd look after a half-ton wardrobe had fallen on top of you," was the retort.

The painter's suspicions proved unjustified. The room to which Miss Banner, sniffing at every step, conducted the trio was empty of wardrobes, whose duty was performed by cupboards let into the wall. Clay made a careful tour.

"Thank you, Miss Bladder——" he began at last.

"Banner!" snapped the manageress.

"If you'll tell the maid to shift Miss Moreland's things?"

With the sniffs dying away down the passage, Lucien beckoned to Biggin.

"Rig a couple of bolts inside the door," he instructed. "And another bar on the shutters. Superin-

tendent Heppel and I will be busy to-night. You will be alone on guard and Miss Moreland may prefer you to go outside while she undresses."

"May she?" was the only comment that Hope had strength to pass.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A Use For a Coffin

WRITERS of sea stories are apt to dwell on the uncanny calm that rules before the hurricane. In retrospect Clay's last day with Hope seemed to have just such a halcyon interval—as tranquil, as evanescent, and as portentous of catastrophe. Too quickly the happy hours passed—luncheon at the same table, a drive through the lanes in Dolores, a painting lesson, tea, an attempt to play billiards, a dinner *à deux* (for Mrs. White had a headache)—and already the time had come to escort Hope to her bedroom and to post Biggin on guard outside the door with a revolver deforming his hip pocket.

Lifting the collar of his ulster, Clay hurried down the drive. He had promised Heppel he would be in hiding before the candidates knocked at the door of the sanctuary. He might find, it was hoped, a chance to slip past the janitor.

While he was waiting, the painter examined in the guarded light of a match the grille which admitted to the crypt. The electric wire had been reinterred by the police, but the disturbance of the earth was visible to the instructed eye. If the bars of the grille

had not been cemented into the stonework, Clay would have liked to follow the wire. He did not agree with Heppel that the switch was to be found in Tom Curlew's pew.

At last he heard the steps of the eight candidates. The shadow of an ilex took him to its heart.

The little group gathered in the Gothic archway. A hand knocked thrice on the wood. One half of the double door was cautiously opened. A shaft of light fell on the Seekers. Among them Clay recognized the stocky figure of the pretended dealer in ladies' underwear. One by one they were admitted by the old man in the green cassock, who held the door so narrowly open that each candidate had to squeeze his body through the aperture.

"He is expecting a raid," thought Clay, and shrank into deeper shadow.

For ten more minutes he watched the ruined pile. The voices of boys chanting, the drone of the organ, and the movement of lights told him the priests were busy. A deep bell began to toll. That was a signal for the congregation to arrive. Each newcomer was submitted to the same close scrutiny and was grudgingly permitted to squeeze past the quarter-open door.

Clay hoped devoutly that Mr. Wright would soon find an opportunity to unlatch a window. He did not relish an ascent of the ivy to one of the gaps that Time had breached in the walls.

The wait seemed interminable. A cold wind sent

rags of cloud scudding across a watery moon. Clay was afraid to stamp his feet or beat his arms for warmth. He believed that the ear, as well as the eye, of Evil was keen.

At last Heppel found his chance. The shadow of an arm fell momentarily on the window he had indicated. Like a red ferret Clay shot across the strip of lawn between the ilex and the wall. The ivy gave off a bruised, poisonous smell under the clutch of his fingers as he hoisted himself to the narrow window ledge. The catch was free. Lying on his stomach, to present the minimum of silhouette, he wriggled through the opening.

He judged a pause before he raised his head. The depth of the embrasure and an intervening column screened him from the view of priests and congregation. He pulled at the window behind him, lest the draught should betray his intrusion. The catch was stiff, and he decided that if he persisted the danger of noise was more real. He lowered himself by inches to the ground. Pressed against the convenient pillar, he peeped into the nave. With difficulty he repressed a snort of amusement. On a scarlet-draped throne sat Mr. Wright, wrapped in a snowy cloak. His striped trousers showed at the extremity. His bald head protruded meekly. Seven other figures, only slightly less grotesque, surrounded him on seven other thrones.

"They have improved on the Mother's Knee stuff since my day," said Lucien to himself.

He shifted his gaze. A procession of priests and acolytes was shuffling along the aisle; candles were burning, censers swinging, banners waving.

On either side the congregation knelt in devotion. Aunt Mina had apparently recovered from her indisposition. Tom Curlew and Miss Manfred were sharing a book. Miss Banner still sniffed, and Colonel Webb still stared. The three spinsters whom Clay had insulted on the night of his arrival knelt bonily. There was no sign of Claud Bynion.

Clay leaned forward at risk of discovery to peer up at the organ loft. The bench was occupied by a white-haired priest in a green vestment. Neither the cripple nor his pretty nurse was visible. Clay wondered if the old man was ill.

The procession had stopped in a semicircle, flanking the eight thrones. The organ was silent, and from the Place of Whispers the wonderful voice of the Leader began to recite the oath of Initiation.

"Inasmuch as these eight brothers have passed through the First Preparation and the Final Questioning laid down by the laws of New Search, and inasmuch . . ."

Clay guessed that the administration of the Oath was good for ten minutes and that the attention of the Seekers would not wander. The road was clear to search the crypt. A staircase in the thickness of the wall promised well. A moment later the only sign of Clay's intrusion was an open window that banged and a crimson banner that billowed in the draught.

It took the artist some time to feel his way across the darkness of the crypt to the moon-made checker-board of light and shade that marked the position of the grille. Only when his fingers touched a double strand of wire was he sure that these were the bars he had examined from outside. On hands and knees, through dust and cobwebs, he traced the wire. Round dwarfed pillars that supported the floor of the chapel, under low archways, into cells and niches where the air was foul, he followed it. The matches he struck illuminated stone walls and flags that were sometimes powdery with dust, sometimes dank with ooze.

At last his hands encountered an iron door. He threw his weight against it; to his surprise and a little to his alarm, it moved. The hinges had been oiled, and recently. Clay had no wish to walk into a trap. He stopped on the threshold of the chamber and held a match at arm's length. His eye travelled deliberately over stone walls, floor, ceiling—and came to rest on a black oblong box. . . .

Anyone with a weaker, or perhaps a less sardonic, intelligence would have beaten a hurried retreat. For eye and nostril assured him that he stood at the entrance of a burial vault.

But Clay was not daunted by mortality. His reaction to the discovery was phlegmatic enough. He stooped to assure himself that the wire really entered the chamber. He searched the floor of the crypt until he had found a brick to wedge open the iron

door. His experience at the garage had taught him that, at Blackmere, doors sometimes shut mysteriously. . . .

His retreat made good, he walked into the vault with no particular emotion. The wire led him past the coffin. Curiosity urged him to strike a match. The lid had rotted and between the planks he caught the gleam of bones. Disturbed by the light, a rat ran out.

He shrugged his shoulders and followed the course of the wire. To his surprise it entered a coffin that had been shelved in a niche.

"The progress of Science!" he told himself. "Electricity in the tomb!"

He hesitated a moment before lifting the lid. It crumbled in his hand. He stared into the interior. Many an old-fashioned London house has been transformed into two maisonettes that sheltered two tenants. The same fate had overtaken the coffin. The original occupant had been rolled up in the decaying rags of his shroud and pushed to the narrow end of his last home. Through the cerement his skull scowled, like an old gentleman at a club window, resentful of the march of progress. The broad end of the coffin was occupied by a cluster of accumulators, coils, and electrical connections.

Clay broke into a peal of laughter. Perhaps his nerves were not as steady as he pretended.

"*'What do the dead do, uncle?'*" he quoted Giovanni. "*'Do they eat, hear music, go a-hunting, and*

be merry as we that live?' To which reasonable question Francisco would answer nowadays: '*No, coz—they listen to the wireless!*' "

Irritably he dropped the coffin lid. Why did he know so little about electricity? All these wires and glass jars and disks of vulcanite meant nothing. He was ignorant of the electrical end they served.

To confuse his task, a maze of wires issued from the farther side of the coffin. It was no longer possible to follow the strand that had been traced from the mast of the sunken wherry. Any one of a score of wires might lead to the switch that had been touched with result so fatal to Brother Cosimo.

Clay selected at chance one of the original colour and thickness. It conducted him across the vault and up a spiral staircase cut in the wall. As he neared the top, his ears told him that the voice which had so impressed him in the Park Lane cathedral was still intoning the Oath of Initiation.

Its notes seemed louder than when he had started his exploration. The reason was soon apparent, for the spiral stair debouched at the back of the Place of Whispers. Half a dozen paces would have carried the painter to the velvet curtain that hid the identity of the mysterious Leader.

But Clay seemed in no hurry to put the matter to the test. He was sniffing a smell of burning that even the heavy scent of incense could not hide. He tiptoed to a pierced screen from behind which he could view the aisles.

His post of vantage commanded a view over the bay and the window that had admitted him to the sanctuary. He could see where the glass hung open. And—more exciting spectacle—he could see what that opening had effected. The crimson banner, billowing in the draught, had met a silver lamp swung toward it by the same agency. The flame had licked the fringe of the embroidery, and the whole fabric was burning briskly. As Lucien watched, the banner fell blazing across a table set with candles. The melting wax added to the fierceness of the flame. By the time a verger had reached the conflagration the efforts of one man were useless. He only spread the fire. The wood of the screen across the side chapel caught. Centuries had dried and seasoned it. It burned like matchwood.

The sound, like a snake's rattle, alarmed the congregation. Heads turned over shoulders and reverence lapsed in little shrieks and exclamations. But no order to disperse came from the Leader. On rolled the beautifully phrased periods of the address to initiates. Its magic no longer had power to hold the candidates, who stirred nervously on eight scarlet thrones.

The heat of the flames was increasing, and danger of a holocaust grew. The beams of the oratory's wooden roof smouldered. The members of the congregation who knelt nearest the door cannot be blamed if they rose to their feet and slipped out. More censure might attach to Mr. Potts, the new

initiate. A glance over his shoulder showed him the open door with figures hurrying through. The next moment he was scuttling down the aisle with the tail of his white cloak tucked over his arm.

His flight started a panic. Initiates, priests, acolytes, vergers, laymen, all rushed in a mob to the door and fought for passage. Robes and vestments were torn, thuribles and banners were jettisoned, one of the spinsters was knocked down and trodden underfoot. And still the voice of the Leader read tranquilly the address. . . .

Two minutes later the nave was full of smoke, and the last of the fugitives had forced his way through the doorway—and the silvery voice went on. . . .

With a strip of his white gown dipped in water from some kind of font and tied over mouth and nose Superintendent Heppel stepped briskly up the Crystal Stair. The scraggy figure of Lucien Clay emerged from his observation post behind the pierced screen.

"It is our duty to warn him!" mumbled the detective indistinctly through the damp cloth.

"Quite apart from any vulgar curiosity!" sneered Lucien.

The superintendent gave his opinion that the fire might do some harm before it burned itself out. At the same time he admitted a desire to see the Leader face to face.

"You'll need good eyes!" was Clay's cryptic comment.

As he spoke, he raised his hand to the curtain that covered the northern end of the Place of Whispers opposite the entrance that had admitted the candidates. The interior yawned in utter darkness, but the mysterious voice persisted, louder with the lifting of the curtain.

"And now, Brothers, that you have subscribed to this most solemn oath. . . ."

Heppel's torch flashed into the black-hung compartment. Except for a vase full of Madonna lilies standing on an ebony stool the Place of Whispers was empty!

CHAPTER XXIX

A Fight in the Dark

"STAY there, Mr. Clay!" shouted Heppel and dodged round the black-hung tabernacle.

The Leader was silent, but another voice made itself heard. The accents were Heppel's, and as that unimaginative man did not talk to himself, they puzzled Lucien. He strained his ears to catch what the detective was saying. He could hear no answering voice through the velvet curtain. A one-sided conversation, it seemed.

There was a clatter on the marble floor. The loud breathing of two men followed. Clay interpreted the sounds. Someone had struck the torch out of Heppel's hand and had closed.

The detective's teeth met on a thick thumb and freed his mouth.

"Clay!" he called. "Quick!"

Released from his vigil, Lucien tore round the back of the tabernacle. A match lighted a momentary picture of Heppel's white-robed corpulence in the muscular embrace of a man whose face was hidden by the hood of a sable cope. Darkness descended as Clay flung himself on the broad shoulders. His

added weight brought the combatants to the ground. For a moment he was on top. Then the big man heaved, and the group reversed. A hand was tangled in Clay's beard in an effort to pull the wiry hairs out by the roots. Clay shouted an oath and bit. The mildness of the answering oath showed that the innocent aggressor was Heppel.

Clay took hold of a head that had too much hair for the detective and banged it twice on the marble. A knee in his stomach cut short this activity. His victim made an effort to pull himself to his feet. He failed, but his contortions sent the trio rolling into the curtains. He tried again, and the hand he had freed clawed at the velvet. There was a tearing sound as the cloth gave under the weight of the three men. Enveloped in the folds, they rolled into the smoke that filled the building. The unknown plunged furiously to free himself. But Heppel clutched his knees, and Clay's thin arms embraced his neck. All three were blinded by smoke and envelopment of the velvet. The big man's foot slipped on the first of the glass steps. A kicking and swearing bundle of black velvet, red hair, striped trousers, threshing arms, cope, ulster, and boots bumped with increasing rapidity down the Crystal Stair. . . .

For some seconds the heap lay motionless and soundless at the bottom. Then it found speech.

"Hell!" said the voice of Lucien Clay.

"Dear me!" was Heppel's milder reaction.

The third ingredient of the bundle was not in a

condition to contribute. Rubbing their bruises, the painter and the policeman struggled to their feet. The figure in the cope lay motionless at the foot of the glass staircase. Heppel made to lift the hood.

"Claud Bynion!" said Clay. "I'd know that neck anywhere!"

His companion twitched back the cloth.

"Is Claud Bynion the Leader?" he demanded.

The artist suggested that he had better ask. The young man was only stunned.

"We shall have to bluff," Heppel replied. "We've nothing proved against him."

He drew his knife to cut strips from the curtain, and signed to Clay to take Bynion's feet.

Together they carried the unconscious man through a low doorway into what seemed, from the garments on the wall, a sort of vestry. Heppel set a chair in the middle of the floor, and soon the helpless man was trussed with bandages of black velvet. An open window and a jug of water brought him round.

The superintendent did not waste the first seconds of semiconsciousness.

"Assaulting the police in the execution of their duty," he remarked to Clay in a loud whisper, his back carefully turned to the patient. "That's what it was. The magistrates are uncommon down on that. Hard labour they give. There was a chap the other day——"

In response to a wink the painter interrupted with a plea for leniency.

"We *might* let him down light," hesitated Heppel, "that is if he'd make a clean breast. But then this business of molesting Miss Moreland. His only chance is to put himself in our hands."

"Hush!" hissed Clay. "He's coming to!"

Bynion's eyes were open. One was turning black. Both glared defiantly.

"This is a bad business, Mr. Bynion," said Heppel, shaking his head gravely. "Assaulting the police!"

"How the devil was I to know the police," asked Claud pertinently, "in those damned silly clothes?"

The superintendent was take aback. He fingered his torn white gown.

"Come, Mr. Bynion!" he protested. "Swearing won't improve matters."

He laid a gingerly thumb on his throat.

"My clothes did not give you the right to strangle me; and, anyhow, yours are no more ordinary."

This was incontrovertible. Bynion asked sullenly what they meant to do.

"That depends on yourself," was the answer. "If you persist in your present attitude, there's no choice. I must charge you."

Claud Bynion scowled back at the threat.

"If, however," persisted the superintendent in his most persuasive tones, "you were to tell me everything, I'd see what we could do."

The man he had tied to the chair appeared to consider the offer.

"Nothing doing!" he said at last.

Heppel shrugged his shoulders.

"You've had your chance," he sighed.

Clay drew the detective into the corner.

"He's not that sort," he stated. "Shall I try?"

It was not long before Heppel regretted his consent, for Lucien's knife was cutting the young man's bonds.

"What's that for?" Bynion asked suspiciously.

Clay rolled the velvet into a ball.

"We want your help!"

"Then you can bally well want. Knock a chap out, truss him like a chicken, and ask for his help!"

Clay told him to shut up.

"Not for ourselves. For Hope!" He thrust his beard into the young man's face. "Aren't you in love with her?"

"Mind your own business!"

"It may be more my business than you know. Won't you, for Hope's sake?"

After a pause Claud Bynion stated gruffly that he would give his life for Hope.

For the first time Clay felt kindly toward his rival.

"I don't want your life. But I must have the whole story. From the beginning—and quick!"

Bynion hesitated.

"You swear by whatever you believe in, both of you, that you are on Hope's side? You're not in Curlew's pay?"

Clay answered coldly that he was in no one's pay.

"I am in the service of Art. And Art does not pay!"
He paused and added: "Superintendent Heppel is
in His Majesty's pay!"

Bynion seemed to be satisfied. He leaned back in
his chair and began his story.

CHAPTER XXX

Claud's Story

"DID either of you know my father?" asked Claud Bynion with his eyes on the stone floor of the vestry.

His hearers shook their heads.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "There aren't many good men. He was in all respects my opposite. I'm quick-tempered, impatient, sometimes violent."

Heppel fingered the bruise on his throat and remarked that he would be the last to deny it.

"Go on," commanded Clay. "I know about your character. I described it to Hope as soon as I saw your face."

Bynion swallowed an angry retort.

"My father," he went on, "was patient, wise, long-suffering. He needed to be. I won't tell you how many messes he saved me from or how often he came to my rescue. For his sake I tried to change my nature. It isn't easy. For his sake I became a New Seeker."

"Was that Sir Robert's idea?" asked Clay in surprise. "It doesn't fit with the character you have described."

"My own idea," admitted Bynion. "I thought a new religion would give me a new start. New leaf.

New bottles. New Search! The headquarters of the sect was only a few miles from home. I flung myself at the hope."

"As you do at everything!" was the painter's severe comment.

"Of course I soon saw that the whole thing was bunk. But I wouldn't admit it. I clung to my hope of a new start. Instead of backing out, I plunged deeper in. Seeker, initiate, lay brother, I used to walk in processions."

"I've seen you," put in Clay.

"I hoped that if I submerged myself deep enough in the doctrine of the New Search I would find the help I needed. Instead——"

The young man broke off and stared gloomily at the floor. Guessing the trend of his thoughts, his listeners remained silent.

"I loved my father," he said at last, "and in spite of the difference of our characters I understood him. That's how I *knew* that his death was neither suicide nor accident. That wasn't the way my father would act."

"You believed, then——" Heppel began.

"I *knew* he was murdered. How, I am still at my wit's end to discover."

"We know how," Clay interposed. "Do you know *who*?"

"Who?" shouted Bynion. "I'll tell you who! But what's the good without proofs?"

"What indeed?" asked Clay.

"As soon as the police took me to see his body I understood that they suspected me. All I wanted was to drag his murderer into the dock. If the judge let him off, to strangle him with my own hands. All the intimate little possessions seemed to shout for vengeance—the old gardening tools, the camera. . . . I can't look at a kodak now without remembering the one that lay open by my father's murdered body!"

"So I saw!" commented Lucien.

"I made up my mind that as soon as the inquest was over I'd dodge the police and devote myself body and soul to hunting the murderer. Something happened at the funeral to show me where to look."

Clay leaned forward.

"In the cemetery"—Bynion's voice was low—"Curlew, Tom Curlew, came up to me to sympathize."

His face darkened as he said the name, and his throat throbbed angrily. Clay remembered his perturbation when Curlew had arrived at the Priory.

"I knew him," he growled. "I knew he was an unsuccessful competitor of my father's. And that the Galérie Mondaine was wiping the floor with Curlew & Blackett's!"

He turned his lowering eyes to the painter.

"I think perhaps people with violent emotions can feel the emotions of others. Our blood runs quickly and receives impressions that wiser men miss. I *knew*

the brute was glad my father was dead, although the actual words he spoke were decent enough."

The young man imitated the bluff accents of the store proprietor.

"My dear Claud! What a terrible affair! I can't tell you how grieved I am. . . .' And all the time my blood was hearing his thoughts: 'Thank God, that clever old man is out of the way! His business was a one-man show. Now he is gone, that strangling competition is over. I'm not frightened of his young fool of a son.' "

Clay grunted.

"I dare say you were right. Self-interest is the Jehovah of our civilization. That doesn't prove the man murdered your father!"

"Wait!" exclaimed Bynion sharply. "As Curlew turned away from the cemetery, a man I knew stopped him. A little man with a squint. I couldn't be mistaken. He was one of the priests of the New Search. I saw him hand Curlew half a sheet of note-paper. I glanced over his shoulder. What do you think was written?"

"Anathoth," said Clay indifferently. He was rolling a cigarette, apparently oblivious of the sacred nature of their surroundings.

"How on earth——?" began Bynion, then saw from the painter's face that he was wasting his time. "What does the word mean?"

"You didn't guess that!" exclaimed the artist. "Then why——?"

"The squinting priest proved a connection between New Search, Tom Curlew, and the murder. I made up my mind to shadow the heads of the movement. Just as I was doing to-night when you interfered with me."

Clay turned to Heppel.

"You see how our friend works," he remarked. "A St. Bernard puppy in a field full of partridges. His nose is all right. That tells him that there are birds about. He dashes madly about the field barking and pouncing. Simply making them wild."

Claud asked what the devil he meant. The artist went on calmly to the detective.

"You can have him as a shining example of the dangers of imagination! Lucky we have till now escaped his coöperation. Lucky I was there to rescue Hope from his services."

"Rescue Hope from me!" The young man stammered in his indignation.

Clay added oil to the flames.

"If I hadn't let her think I suspected you of the attempts on her life, God knows where you'd have landed her!"

"Mr. Bynion hasn't explained why he was hanging round Miss Moreland," Heppel reminded severely.

Claud gave him a sour look.

"You don't give me a chance to explain. You're too busy sitting on my head. If you want to know why I followed Hope——"

"Yes?" said Clay.

"In the sanctuary I found a book of New Search devotions. *The Portal*, it is called. A strip of paper fell out. On it I saw two sets of initials. One above the other."

He pulled out a pencil and wrote on the white wood of the table:

Sir R. B.
H. Z. M.

"Did you keep the paper?" Clay was interested once more.

The young man replied that he had thought better to replace it.

"You would!" sneered Lucien.

Bynion got red but did not retort.

"I guessed the meaning. If only I could find H. Z. M! What did Z. stand for? Zenobia, was it? Or Zenocrates? Or Zero? One day I passed the office of my hotel——"

"Yes, yes," Clay interrupted hurriedly. "Hope Zoë Moreland signed her name in the book. Why on earth her godfathers and godmothers at her baptism——"

"The obvious explanation of the strip of paper was that H. Z. M. was the tool that Curlew had used in the murder. Believing that, like a fool, I started to shadow Hope. At the end of two days I knew I must be blasphemously wrong, and that the loveliest woman in the world could not possibly——"

"What were you doing in St. James's Square?" cut in the painter.

"Looking at her!" Claud's black eye and swollen lip made his air of rapture a trifle ludicrous. "I'd seen her car and I waited for her to come back."

"If you'd stopped some murderous hireling unscrewing her wheel nuts," Clay pointed out brutally, "it would have been worth five reels of Love's Young Dream! You never suspected why Hope's initials followed your father's?"

Claud relapsed into lyricism. Her beauty had beggared him of thought, as her nearness had deprived him of speech when Clay had introduced him at the Priory.

"Don't you see?" Clay had waited without patience. "Her death was planned to follow your father's!"

Claud jumped to his feet, knocking over his chair.

"You don't think that!" he exclaimed. "Curlew had never seen her! If I believed that he——"

Heppel turned to Clay. In the distance the hotel clock struck eleven.

"I think we'd better visit Curlew," he suggested. "He'll be back at the Priory!"

"Yes!" cried Claud. "I'll choke the truth out of him!"

"You," replied the painter coldly, "will stay outside his door. This interview will need brain, not beef!"

As he led the way out of the chapel, he favoured

Heppel with a summary of his views on the subject of Claud Bynion. The partiality which Hope had shown may have coloured them.

"That," he said, "is a most dangerous young man! He is 'too rash, too unadvised, too sudden.' He's about as safe as a flash of lightning. He'd make an undertaker's fortune!"

CHAPTER XXXI

A Balance Sheet

THE hotel clock struck eleven. Hope Moreland came away from the window.

"I can't see any more flames," she told Sergeant Biggin.

The sergeant's hand played with a packet of Gold-flake in his pocket. His knowledge of etiquette told him that he must not smoke in a lady's bedroom. Three quarters of an hour before, a sense of duty and the sound of hurrying feet had dislodged him from his chair in the passage. If trouble was brewing, his place was by Miss Moreland's side. Hope had not been sorry to hear his knock. Clay's warning had stirred in her a sense of danger. Against nocturnal terrors the strongest-minded woman finds comfort in the presence of the weakest-bodied male. Hope laid no claim to an emancipated spirit, and Sergeant Biggin had a revolver in his pocket.

Together from the window they had watched the progress of the fire. They had seen the flames flicker through the breaches in the walls of the oratory and had listened to the tumultuous passage of the worshippers. Now the excitement was over and

quiet had descended on the hotel. Sergeant Biggin wondered if the time had not come for a cigarette in the passage.

An obscure instinct restrained him. In this luxurious, well-lighted, and well-heated room there was a feeling of discomfort that he had not noticed in the comparatively dark and draughty corridor. Police sergeants are not encouraged to believe in telepathy, but Biggin had followed some correspondence in his morning paper, and the idea crossed his brain that his charge's fear might communicate itself to his nerves. He had daughters of his own, and her relief at his entry had not escaped him.

"Not feeling nervous, miss?" he said encouragingly.

Hope gave her Madonna smile.

"Oh, no! Not with *you* here!"

The sergeant felt a glow of self-approval.

"Not a bit nervous," she repeated. "Only——"

"Only what, miss?"

"You don't think there's a cat in the room? Cats give me the creeps. It might have slipped in with you."

Sergeant Biggin knew that no cat had accompanied him. But her question gave him an excuse to search the room. He would be glad to see if there was any sense in that feeling of his.

Behind the curtains, under the bed, inside the cupboards, under the valance of the dressing table—there was no cat to be seen, nor, said Biggin to him-

self, anything else. He rapped on the wall paper. All solid and reassuring.

"Thank you," said Hope. "How silly of me! But I could have sworn there was something watching me!"

"You're a bit jumpy, miss." He did not allude to himself. "No wonder, after all that's happened."

He felt that he was not being tactful and tried to strike a more reassuring note. He scratched his head for a story or anecdote to amuse her. He could think of nothing more suitable than an account of an execution he had once witnessed. He grabbed at the first names that offered.

"Superintendent Heppel and Mr. Lucien Clay—that's a smart couple. You're all right with them looking after you."

"Lucien Clay!" Hope had been avoiding thought on that disturbing subject ever since the painter had left her. But uncomfortable thoughts are better than irrational fears. And sooner or later they must be faced.

Her friendship with Lucien had started as a joke, a whim. It was rather elegant to have a tame genius attached to one's sweeping skirts. Especially a disreputable genius who stood in such need of a good woman's influence.

The next stage had been dependence on his uncanny foresight, his impatient devotion. Three times at least he had saved her life. He passed out of the category of jokes, good or bad.

Then, after the manner of men, he began to presume on her good-natured acceptance of his service. Devotion became indistinguishable from dictation, and took acquiescence for granted. To put him in his place she had planned and executed the flight to London with . . . She was not going to think about *him*. He was worse than Lucien and, as far as she could understand, was set on her destruction. It isn't wise to marry a man who wants to murder you—but who was talking about marriage? Lucien hadn't, although his eyes . . .

That outcome of their friendship, partnership, call it what you will, have never entered her head. Lucien was old enough to be her . . . She had once said something like that, and his face had given him away. She did not like hurting people, certainly not people who cared for her. But marriage . . . ! All afternoon he had been—the word sounded incongruous of Lucien Clay—almost tender! And Hope had not discouraged him. She had felt a little like a lion tamer the first time Black Mane lays a head on her knee. Nervous, exultant, and—who knows?—a little sorry for her conquest. Males are so helpless.

But Hope was not a flirt. Flirts became extinct with Edward the Peacemaker. Shortly before the Great War, in fact. Their place in the evolutionary scale was taken by "bits" and serious young things. Hope was very young and very serious. She had to decide what was her duty.

With a glance at Sergeant Biggin, who was occu-

pied with the pictures of brassières in the beginning of a woman's journal, she reached for a sheet of writing paper.

Down the middle she drew an imperfectly straight line. One division she headed: "In favour of marrying Lucien Clay." On the other she wrote: "Against marrying Lucien," until there was no more room.

Then she paused.

In the left-hand column she scribbled hurriedly: "He's in love with me—at least, I think he is," and without more hesitation filled in the other side: "But I don't think I'm in love with him."

Below she added: "He drinks." But on the credit side of Clay's ledger was conscientious enough to state: "It's my duty to reclaim him."

In the left-hand column she wrote: "He's a genius." And cross-entered: "At least, he says he is, but I don't think I quite understand his pictures."

She sucked her pencil for a minute before she put in capital letters: "HE IS AT LEAST SIXTY"—(Clay was born in '85). She puzzled for some minutes before she could find any set-off. Then in the honesty of her heart she wrote: "But Claud has tried to murder me."

She stared at the paper, and entries for the right-hand column came tumbling into her head. Lucien's beard, his manners, his tailor were chalked up to his discredit. And all that Hope could find for the other side was a row of ditto marks under that final entry that damned Claud Bynion. At last her invention

dried up. Sergeant Biggin watched her, motionless and anxious, pencil to pretty lips.

"She's writing a love letter," he thought with the sentimentality of his profession.

With a sigh she made up her mind. She drew a line across the page from side to side and cast up the account.

"*If he wants it,*" she wrote slowly, "*I will marry Lucien.*"

She sat with finger tips pressing her eyelids.

"Sleepy," said the sergeant to himself. Aloud: "Why don't you have a lay down, miss? I'm sure it's past your bedtime. You'll be quite safe with me here."

She resented the imputation.

"Oh, no! I sit up till all hours!"

But it was true that writing and thinking tired one. Especially when one came to such very difficult decisions.

Another objection occurred.

"I'd crumple my dress."

Sergeant Biggin glanced at the summer cloud of tulle and sympathized.

"Slip on a dressing gown. I'll wait outside."

Hope looked longingly at the bed. But her *malaise* had not dispersed.

"I don't think I want to be left alone," she said slowly.

"I'll turn my back."

"Oh, no! I couldn't."

Biggin touched the packet of Goldflake in his pocket.

"I tell you what, miss. I'll slip outside. You won't be a minute. And I'll leave my revolver for you on the table. You'll feel safe with that."

Hope nodded doubtfully.

"Will it make a terrible noise?" she asked.

The detective laughed.

"Bless your heart, you won't have to use it! I won't be gone a minute."

He laid the automatic on the table beside the balance sheet that the girl had compiled, and with an encouraging nod walked briskly to the door. His fingers round the handle, he paused.

"Call out if you want me!"

Once in the corridor his fingers extracted the coveted Virginian from the yellow packet. He lighted it and leaned his back against the door. He noticed that the moment he was outside Hope's room the feeling that he was being watched had vanished.

CHAPTER XXXII

Curlew's Confession

SUPERINTENDENT HEPPEL refused the Corona Corona that Mr. Curlew extended. Lucien Clay stuck his in the corner of his mouth. Claud Bynion, restless in the passage outside the door of the private sitting room, did not get the chance.

"Well, gentlemen!" The proprietor of Curlew & Blackett's looked up anxiously. "What can I do for you?"

Clay rolled the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"Spill it!" he said tersely.

Tom Curlew raised sandy eyebrows. He moistened his lips before he denied that there was anything to "spill." The painter ignored his protest.

"Our young friend Claud is in favour of choking you with his bare hands. Our middle-aged friend Heppel has the same kindly thought with a professional leaning to judicial methods."

A lean finger sketched the jerk of a tightening rope. Tom Curlew covered his eyes with his hand.

"They can't do that!" he stammered.

"That remains to be seen!" Clay's voice was pessimistic. "For the moment, I have persuaded the superintendent to give you a chance to make a clean breast here, in your comfortable room, instead of in the sanitary but unæsthetic setting of a police station."

"I swear to God," said Curlew eagerly, "I'm innocent!"

Clay flicked the ash of his cigar to the floor.

"Oh, no, you're not!" he declared. "Not innocent. At the same time, I don't believe that that cranial development conceived the routine of thirty-eight successful murders. If you are the man who has terrorized Capital in England, my whole theory is at fault."

"I'm not! On my oath I'm not!"

The man was white with fear.

"But you know who he is," pursued Clay relentlessly.

"I swear I don't!"

"You know the meaning of Anathoth?"

"Anathoth?" The syllables were whispered in accents of horror.

"Yes. The word you typed when you paid Brother Cosimo twenty thousand pounds in bearer bonds. The word you read at Robert Bynion's funeral!"

The loose lips moved, but no sound came.

"'Answer to prayer,' " persisted Clay. He leaned forward and stared into the man's terror-stricken eyes. "What prayer?"

"Then you—know?" the wretch stammered.

"Yes!" Clay did not stick at details. "But unless you tell the superintendent the whole story I can do nothing to save you."

Curlew looked distractedly round the room. Heppel stood between him and the door.

"Very well," he muttered. "I'll tell you everything. You'll see I wasn't to blame."

"I must warn you," said Heppel in his unemotional tones, "that what you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you."

Curlew's fingers fumbled with a cigar. They shook so that he could not cut the end. With an oath he hurled the Corona into the waste-paper basket.

"I wish I'd never heard of New Search!" he cried.

It seemed that the store in Regent Street had been losing money for years. Curlew tried whisky. Trade went from bad to worse. He tried religion. Unfortunately the brand that attracted his self-indulgent nature was New Search. In the elaborate ritual of the Park Lane cathedral and in the comfortable utterances of the Guide he found a drug to soothe his worries. After some months he presented himself for Initiation.

Curlew looked up from the carpet which had been the recipient of his confidences.

"You can't imagine," he muttered, "how they get you hazed."

"I can," said Heppel. "Go on, Mr. Curlew."

In the course of Preparation, the storekeeper had

blurted out the deplorable state of his business and foretold the ruin which the rivalry of the *Galérie Mondaine* threatened.

At last he had stood in the darkness of the *Place of Whispers*.

"Pray aloud for the inmost desire of your heart!" the voice of the Leader had ordered, and Curlew had prayed for his store's recovery.

"If your fortunes revived," asked the voice, *"would your gratitude be manifest in thank offerings?"*

Curlew promised eagerly.

"When your prayer is granted," the voice decreed, *"you shall pay twenty thousand pounds to furnish the needs of New Search."*

Nine months later, when only a miracle could save him from bankruptcy, he opened his newspaper to stare at the report of his rival's death. His first feeling had been of vast relief. Then he was appalled. In how terrible a manner had his wish been granted! Could the long arm of coincidence, or must the efficacy of prayer, claim the credit for his deliverance? He tried to convince himself that the answer to his petition was fortuitous. Then, at his rival's funeral, came the demand for payment—Anathoth, "answer to prayer," a Hebrew word used in the *New Search* liturgy.

From that moment, in spite of the rapid recovery of his finances, he had been a prey to remorse. By some means, whether human or supernatural he

could never decide, his prayer had been terribly answered. A man had died—accidentally, said the coroner—and the fortune of Curlew & Blackett's had been restored.

"No wonder," cried the man who profited, "I can't face young Bynion! No wonder I daren't sleep for dreams of the old man! No wonder I've lost my appetite!"

Heppel raised a blunt forefinger.

"And the bottle of cyanide in the secret drawer?"

Curlew looked curiously at the little detective.

"You don't miss much!" He shrugged his shoulders. "Cyanide, they say, is an easy death. I bought the bottle when bankruptcy seemed inevitable."

"For yourself!" exclaimed Heppel in a low voice, and added: "Of course your statements will have to be checked."

"I think," said Clay slowly, "he has told the truth. One point, however, wants explaining. Why did you shut me into the garage? Are you fond of practical jokes?"

"The day I wanted you to play golf?" queried Curlew. "I never touched the doors!"

Heppel showed signs of impatience.

"What we must concentrate on is this—" he tapped on the table—"who is the Leader?"

Curlew's complexion was less mottled.

"None of us ever saw him. He seemed to live in the Place of Whispers."

"Yes," sneered Clay, "on a bowl of lilies!"

He became suddenly serious. His fingers combed his beard.

"Find the Leader and you have caught the author of thirty-eight unexplained murders!"

"Find him!" cried Heppel. "With all the will in the world! But where are we to look?"

"Look," said Clay slowly, "for a man with a love of music!"

Before the words had left his lips the door was flung open. Claud Bynion tumbled headlong into the room. His fingers gripped the wrist of Sergeant Biggin. His jaw was set like a boxer's.

"This fool says," he shouted, "that Hope Moreland can't be found!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

Trapped!

CLAY was the first to reach the door of Hope's bedroom. It was locked. He had to wait until Biggin with the key caught up.

"I locked it to prevent anyone meddling," he explained.

"The stable door!" was Clay's bitter comment.

The sergeant looked hurt. Before he left the girl, he had searched the room. He had laid his revolver for her use on the table. She had only to call. And he waited with his back against the door until the time a girl needed to put on her dressing gown ceased to amuse and began to alarm him. He knocked—no answer. Threw open the door—the room was empty!

That Clay could see for himself. Two strides carried him to the table on which lay Biggin's automatic, and the sheet of paper Hope's pencil had covered. He stared. If Heppel, who had waited to halt Bynion and Curlew in the doorway, had not known the painter, he would have thought Lucien blushed.

"What's that?" he asked.

Clay folded the paper and hid it in the recesses of his ulster.

"Nothing material," he said. "Except as evidence of her state of mind."

Heppel stared round the tidy room.

"No struggle," he remarked. "You'd say she'd gone of her own accord."

"Chloroform!" suggested Claud hollowly from the doorway.

Heppel looked at him sharply.

"*You* don't know anything, Mr. Bynion?" he said. "There was a certain expedition to London——"

Claud shook his head miserably.

"I wish to heaven I *had* been looking after her," he groaned. "The police! My God!"

Clay pointed to the wisp of tulle on the bed.

"She would hardly have gone to London in her shift."

"She might have changed," was Heppel's patient suggestion.

He peeped into the two wall cupboards. "Full of clothes."

"For heaven's sake," Bynion burst in, "do something! Your talk drives me mad!"

Heppel was examining the window. The catch of the shutter bar was unfixed. Biggin bore witness that the fastening had been firm when he searched the room.

Heppel threw wide the window and stared into the night.

"An active man could climb that pipe."

"And force open shutters that were fastened on the inside?" demanded Lucien.

"If he knocked on the window and if Miss Moreland knew him, she might have opened them," the superintendent persisted. "But how——"

Bynion's fingers were tapping on the woodwork.

"I can't stand this. Think what may be happening to her!"

Clay leaned out of the window.

"Heppel!" he said. "There are flower beds underneath. There is nothing the police enjoy so much as finding footprints on flower beds. Do have a look."

Heppel moved reluctantly toward the door.

"And in the sacred name of Alma Tadema," cried Clay, "take the rabble with you! I must think. There may be nothing but my brain between Hope and death."

When the door shut behind the four men he sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. For several minutes he sat motionless. At last he stood up and began to enact what he had been visualizing of the movements of the girl from the moment that Biggin left her.

He watched the imaginary shutting of the door and jumped at its inaudible bang. His hand went to the revolver that lay on the table, hovered, and shrank back to his lap.

With the airs of eighteen he rose to his feet and crossed to the window. His hand fingered the catch

of the bar, left it as the simulated memory of instructions returned, and with a shrug decided to endure the stuffiness of the room.

He returned to the bed and, still mimicking Hope, slipped his ulster off his shoulders and tossed it on the counterpane.

Then he drifted to the dressing table and stood, grotesquely enough, examining his face in the mirror. The reflection that even a police sergeant is a man decided him to go through the motions of powdering a face and neck. Another glance at the mirror and he lounged to the wall cupboard. He opened it and stood looking in. It was unusually deep, but in its depths gleamed faintly the swansdown of a dressing wrap. He lifted an arm. The garment was out of reach. He stepped into the recess. As his hand touched the delicate stuff, the door shut behind him with a little click. At the same moment the floor began to sink beneath his feet.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Meet the Leader

CLAY's reconstruction of Hope's actions had been oversuccessful. Too late he understood why her room had been changed and why her dressing gown had been hung out of reach at the back of a cupboard whose floor could be worked like a lift.

At least, he reflected, as the cage dropped slowly down the dark shaft, he was on his way to discover where the girl he loved had gone. Although he did not believe in firearms, his mind dwelt on the revolver he had left on the bedroom table.

At last the sensation of falling through the darkness stopped. Without a jar the lift touched the bottom of its run. Clay did not move. The next trap that had been laid might be more 'deadly.

He listened. He could hear nothing. He found the matches in his pocket and lighted one with no preliminary scrape. Its light showed him that he stood alone at the bottom of the shaft. The walls were stone. They gave no foothold. Even an acrobat would find a return climb impossible.

He lighted a second match and illuminated a small

iron door. It was shut and without a keyhole through which he could reconnoitre. In Clay a sensitiveness to atmosphere was developed. He was conscious of a warning that Evil waited on the other side of the iron door. But he had no choice. Every minute was important in the race for Hope's life.

He took the precaution of wrapping a ragged handkerchief round his fingers before he gripped the handle of the door.

His prudence was justified if insufficient. For as he turned the handle a fine point shot out of the knob and stabbed the palm of his hand through the folded handkerchief.

"Poison!" The word rang through his brain like a knell. He twisted the handkerchief round his wrist and strained it with all his strength. If only he could stop the virus before it was absorbed into his system! He kicked the door open. His time might be short.

He found himself in an empty room. There were no windows. The walls were lined with books. The door by which he had come was concealed in a bookcase, and there seemed to be no other entrance. The apartment was warmed by an electric radiator, and a reading lamp was burning. A book lay open under the lamp. Clay glanced at it. Its title was *Les Crimes d'amour*.

He wiped his forehead. His heart was thumping. He was trapped, he was poisoned, he had lost Hope. And her captor's favourite author was Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade.

He made a circuit of the room, searching for a door. As he raised his hand to a protruding book that might conceal some device, his arm felt heavy and numb. The poison was beginning to work.

The book was innocent, and he desisted. His feet dragged as he stumbled across the room. How much more time had he?

A familiar voice broke the silence of the underground apartment.

"Take a seat, Mr. Clay, I won't keep you long."

Lucien recognized the mellifluous accents of the Leader, who still preserved his incognito of invisibility. He managed to contrive a laugh.

"We too have a wireless at home!" he jeered.

There was no answer. He dropped on a sofa and waited. The extremities of his limbs were now quite numb. His brain was as clear as ever.

Without a sound a section of the bookcase that contained a collection of the works of Sir James Barrie and Mr. A. A. Milne slid back. Through the gap that yawned appeared the clean white coif and rather foreign features of Miss Lasken, the pretty nurse. In front of her she pushed the crippled Mr. Wentworth in his wheel chair.

The old gentleman beamed at Lucien through the thick glass of his spectacles.

"Good-evening, Mr. Clay. I won't call this visit a surprise. You fell in with our plans most considerably."

"You are clever at disguising your voice," remarked Clay negligently.

John Wentworth chuckled with delight.

"The study of sound waves is a profitable hobby. Among other discoveries I found out how to build up a voice on the wireless, as you call it. The elocution of the Leader is the result."

"Ingenious!" admitted Clay. "You sit here, or in your organ loft, listen by means of a microphone to the words of the initiates in the Place of Whispers and answer in the impressive voice that the bowl of lilies reproduces. Of course we noticed that the lips of the organist were moving."

"In prayer," smiled John Wentworth. "Devotion covers so much."

"Even murder?" said Clay steadily.

The scientist nodded brightly.

"Talking of that," he remarked, "I must set your mind at rest on two counts. Hope Moreland is in my hands."

"Alive?" The painter hardly dared to ask.

John Wentworth meticulously consulted his watch.

"At the moment," he replied casually.

The dreadful implication overstrained Clay's self-control. He made an effort to rise from the sofa. If only he could get his fingers on the skinny throat . . .! But his limbs would not obey. He fell back. Wentworth signed to his attendant to advance his chair.

"A little numb?" he asked with a horrible assumption of a bedside manner. "That's the curare."

Clay could not repress a shiver. So he had been injected with the South American arrow poison. How long had he to live?

The cripple seemed to read his thoughts.

"That was my other bit of good news." He smiled encouragingly. "The little device in the handle of the door, by which I secure myself against intrusion, was not charged—this time—with a fatal dose. We cannot spare you—yet, Mr. Clay."

For all his stoicism, Clay heaved a sigh of relief. The game was not lost until he was dead. His lowered eyelids hid his thoughts.

"A reduced dose of curare," the scientist was telling him, "has a temporary effect on the motor nerve-endings of the muscles. In a short time you will find yourself quite unable to move. As a sufferer from a partial paralysis acquired by experimenting with certain poisons, I can sympathize."

Speech was difficult, and Clay did not trouble to repudiate the murderer's condolences.

"The advantage to me, and, I must admit, the disadvantages to you"—the cripple's eyes gleamed behind his glasses—"of this form of temporary paralysis is that the sensory nerves are not affected. Not only can you hear and see what is going on, but you can feel it."

He paused to let the horrible significance of his words sink in.

"Curare is sometimes employed," he resumed, "in the practice of vivisection. Our sentimental regulations prescribe the simultaneous use of an anæsthetic. I do not believe in anæsthetics."

Clay knew that he was helpless in the hands of a devil. He glanced at the nurse. He read no mercy in her bold eyes.

"What I have said—" Wentworth was polishing his spectacles on a silk handkerchief as if he had been uttering the most benevolent of commonplaces—"what I have said will, I feel sure, convince you of the need to carry out my instructions."

Clay waited. What infamy would this fiend dictate?

"Before the drug takes its full effect and you are reduced to a state of complete immobility you will write a note to your *confrère*, Superintendent Hep-pel, to reassure him of your and Miss Hope's safety. Otherwise he might be anxious."

With an effort Clay shook his head. The cripple did not seem to have noticed.

"You will explain," he went on, "that you have found your little friend and have taken her in my car to a place of concealment and safety. That will set his mind at ease."

Again Clay shook his head. Already his neck was stiffening.

"Think again, Mr. Clay. Remember that you are completely helpless. It is useless to look at Miss Las-

ken. Her interests and mine are identical. There are a hundred equally entertaining means of compulsion which will leave your right hand quite capable of writing."

Clay's mouth framed the syllable "no."

He heard the nurse's starched dress rustle. He saw that she was busy at a cupboard hidden in the books. When she turned she held a large glass funnel.

"Taking everything together," said Wentworth's silky voice, "this method of persuasion is the most convenient. It makes no marks and when your body is found in the lake, no one will be able to guess that the condition of the stomach and lungs is due to—the Question by Water and not to ordinary drowning."

The restless hands caressed the funnel. Miss Lasken brought a large jug of water from the cupboard.

"After all—" the cripple's eyes had a meditative cast—"the Holy Inquisition were our masters. Suffocation is infinitely painful, and when the sensation can be prolonged indefinitely . . ."

He handed the funnel to the nurse. Holding it delicately, she approached the helpless painter.

Clay had made up his mind.

"I'll write!" he managed to utter.

"I knew you would," the soft voice stated. "Pain is the brave man's master. Better before than after."

Miss Lasken was arranging a rest and a writing pad under the painter's hand. She placed a pencil

between his stiffening fingers. Very slowly and with long pauses Clay scrawled:

13 Oct:

DEAR HEPPEL

I have found Miss Moreland and I am quite sure she ought to be kept hidden somewhere safe and where it may be possible: under existing circs: to change ground whenever necessary. Therefore with Mr. Wentworth's help am taking her to town.

Haste,

LUCIEN CLAY.

The pencil fell from his grasp, and he sat staring miserably before him. Wentworth signed to Nurse Lasken. She twitched the paper out of the painter's impotent hand.

The old man read the letter through slowly. The yellow skin on his high, bald forehead was wrinkled.

"That's right," he said at last. "Except the date! It's the twelfth."

Again the nurse gave Clay the pencil, but by now the drug seemed to have taken full effect. The pencil rolled from between his fingers.

"Never mind," the scientist decided, and gave the girl her orders.

She disappeared through the bookcase.

"And now," said John Wentworth, "we can talk. Or rather *I* can talk, while you can listen."

He propelled his wheel chair to a corner of the room that was out of Clay's range of vision. He returned with two hypodermic syringes on his lap. Mak-

ing a careful selection, he pressed the needle of one into his own wrist.

"Cocaine," he remarked. "I want my faculty for enjoyment at its fullest."

When Miss Lasken had refilled the empty syringe Wentworth laid the two of them side by side on the sofa and leaned back in his chair, with eyes closed. He could not know that the tourniquet which Clay had bound on his arm had retarded the full effect of the curare. With infinite effort the painter managed to move his foot a few inches. A touch displaced the nearer hypodermic. It rolled six inches and reversed the position of the two syringes.

The cripple opened his eyes. Lucien was staring blankly at the floor.

"On several occasions," Wentworth's face looked younger for the injection, "you have shown yourself interested in my affairs. Not always at convenient moments. That curiosity may now be satisfied with interest to you and without danger to me. Indeed, to give a few details will be pleasurable since one of the disappointments in murder is the secrecy which has to be preserved. The artist is robbed of the applause that is his mead. An exception may be made in your case."

The cripple again consulted his watch.

"In two hours from now," his smile was very bland, "you will be giving a fresh proof of the exactitude of proverbial wisdom—for dead men tell no tales."

CHAPTER XXXV

How to Make Murder Pay

LUCIEN lay like a log on the couch and listened to the revelation of a damned soul. The man was not mad, but almost superhumanly wicked. If Satan were ever incarnate in man, John Wentworth's was the body.

He had taken to a career of murder for the sheer pleasure that killing by subtle and ingenious means could bring.

"Why not?" he asked the impotent form on the sofa. "Your magnate spends his thousands on mowing down pheasants for the pleasure dexterity in dealing death can give. Your Spaniard spends his last peseta on the blood lust of a bullfight. Your fox hunter risks his neck in search of the thrill only risk can buy. Murder is the ideal sport that calls for the height of dexterity, touches the summit of risk, and sheds the maximum of blood."

His weak eyes shone with an unholy relish.

"The summit of risk," he repeated. "At what other game of chance is death by hanging the penalty for a false move? Suppose a clue is left uncovered? Suppose a calculation has been at fault? Suppose Scotland Yard or Lucien Clay has a moment of vision? Be-

lieve me, I have passed some marvellous moments of suspense. No lover waiting outside his mistress's bedroom, no gambler watching for the wheel to point to suicide can ever have enjoyed sensations as keen as mine."

Clay saw from the light in his eyes that his pleasure was no pose. His appetite could be contented by no less violent stimulant.

"That is not all!" He leaned forward. "By introducing business methods I have added to the pleasures of a sport the profits of a profession. I have solemnized the union of business and pleasure."

He laughed softly.

"The murder," he dogmatized, "which I may call ideal should satisfy four requirements. It must give intellectual pleasure in its conception, pecuniary advantage by its accomplishment, excitement in its consequences, and sensual pleasure over its performance."

He paused to let his horrible meaning sink in and added: "Miss Moreland's death will fulfil all four *desiderata*."

Clay registered a vow that, if ever his turn came, he would have no mercy.

"Your demise, Mr. Clay, will be less completely satisfactory. I regret that I can see in it no prospect of any pecuniary advantage."

John Wentworth shook a pessimistic head.

"The question of monetary recompense," he said after a pause, "brings me to the core of my subject.

When I finally decided to abandon the paths of science for the less banal career of assassination, I was faced by one paramount difficulty—how to make murder pay. It was disheartening to recall the profits that contented a pioneer of the talent of Henri Desiré Landru. Monstrous to reflect that the decease of the Widow Buisson brought in her lover and executioner something under ninety pounds; Madame Pascal's disappearance produced a paltry sixteen, and so on. And these pittances, you must remember, were gross takings, without allowance for working costs. I see that you share my indignation and appreciate my effort to raise the emoluments of murder as high as those of Harley Street or the Temple."

He glanced at Clay, as if for his applause. It was impossible to say whether the monster was serious.

"I was set on the high road to success," he confided, "by the recollection of an experience in my early manhood."

* * * * *

It was on a rainy afternoon in the early eighties that young Mr. John Wentworth had awaited the favour of an interview with his uncle and guardian, Mr. Victor Wentworth, chairman of an important private bank in the City of London.

"Well, John," said the old gentleman, catching the skirts of his frock coat in the crook of his arm and warming a large area of sponge-bag trousering at a brisk coal fire. "Well, John, what can we do for our nephew?"

John inserted a finger between a four-inch collar and his throat. He swallowed nervously.

"You see, Uncle"—he began to pour out an appeal that he had rehearsed much more eloquently before his bedroom looking glass. He was wasting, he felt, his time on a banker's stool. This was the century of Science, and the world was calling for young men to devote themselves to research. He believed that his place should be in the vanguard and . . .

The words failed on his tongue as he lifted his embarrassed eyes to his uncle's rigid countenance. There was an uncomfortable pause while the banker laid a large, knuckly hand adorned by a signet ring on the overmantel.

"Well, sir?" he said. "And what has this to do with me? Are you not of age? Are you not free to make a tomfool of yourself if you so wish?"

A scientific training, John hinted unhappily, needed money. Though he was of age and an orphan, he was dependent on his uncle. . . .

"Exactly." The uncle caressed an iron-gray whisker. "Exactly. And while you are dependent on me you remain in the bank. In due course, if you are industrious, you will win promotion. In time you may rise to an important position. It is an open secret that I have made you my heir, and provided that your conduct does not force me to alter my will your future is amply provided."

Mr. Victor Wentworth blew his nose to indicate that the interview was over. Disappointment fanned

hatred in his nephew's heart. The cold-blooded, pompous old bounder! Now he was jerking the bell and ordering a footman, whom he paid as much as his nephew, to whistle for a cab to take him to his club. There he would play three rubbers of whist, as if whist and banking were the only things that mattered.

John watched the reflection of the hansom on the wet street. The jingle of its bells died away. He turned, biting his nails. On the wall that he faced an illuminated text was framed.

"Ask and ye shall receive," he read in debased Gothic lettering. A snarl of irreverent laughter crossed his mouth. He had asked and he had received.

He was immediately frightened at his spasm of revolt. He knew that he had not asked the right Person. For John Wentworth had been given a sound religious up-bringing. Reaction following the inexpensive indulgence of his budding vices brought periods of remorse in its train, when he prayed fervently for forgiveness. Suppose he prayed now? Prayed to be allowed to follow a scientific career and to serve his fellow man?

He knelt with his face to the Chesterfield. But the right words would not come. His hands still shook with the anger that his uncle's refusal had engendered. Hatred flamed in his heart. So long as the old man was alive the nephew was dependent for money to gratify his pleasures and his aspirations. People

did not live forever, but Uncle Victor was only middle-aged and boasted that he was never ill. Before anything happened to him the chance would pass. . . . *O God, that it might happen soon!*

Ashamed and a little afraid, he rose from his knees. He found his top hat and umbrella in the half-lighted hall and picked his way through the drizzle homeward.

Near the Park he came upon a little crowd of loafers indifferent to the weather. A man with a shiny bowler hat was sitting on a horse's head. Young Wentworth, for whom suffering had a curious lure, asked if the horse was hurt.

"'E's orl right," was the answer, "but the ol' gent won't go for any more cab drives, 'e won't!"

John joined the crowd. A dying man was more interesting than an injured horse. Peering under the arm of a red-coated soldier, he recognized with a curious lack of surprise a pair of iron-gray whiskers flanking a jaw that had dropped. . . .

So prayers (he shivered in the rain) were sometimes answered!

* * . * * *

"I was young at the time," the old scientist turned his reminiscent gaze to his prisoner on the sofa, "and the event made an impression. Particularly as it furnished me with the means to live my own life.

"'Forty Years On,' 'Shorter in wind as in memory long'—as we used to sing with such fervour at my

dear old school—I decided to abandon the underpaid and underrecognized career of scientific research. Facing my perplexities, I remembered the lettering of the text in the dark Victorian study, the smell of the horsehair of the Chesterfield, the curl of the iron-gray whiskers, and the glistening of the drops of rain. . . .

“If, I asked myself, the intelligent young man who was then John Wentworth believed for a considerable time that his uncle’s death was an answer to prayer, what would not the neurotic half-wits who compose modern Society be ready to believe—especially if death filled their pockets?”

In spite of his overwhelming anxieties, Clay’s attention was fascinated by this cynical display of the workings of the evil brain.

“I have no time to tell you in detail how I followed up my inspiration,” the cripple continued. “My first needs were an atmosphere and a clientèle. The foundation of a stunt religion seemed the ideal method. I bought the Blackmere estate, priory and chapel, and enlisted the services of Brother Cosimo, who had received a good grounding in the religious movements of the United States. You have seen the cathedral in Park Lane and the sanctuary at Blackmere, and you must admit that we knew how to handle the nerves and emotions of our congregation. Also that we concocted a doctrine and a ritual with sure appeal to a class possessed of sufficient means to be worth exploitation.”

If Clay had been able to speak he would not have withheld his assent.

"Once New Search was fairly launched, I felt the time had come to 'cash in.' For that purpose, about a year ago, I started the Initiation preparations and ceremonies. The object of those calculated mummeries was to discover the most secret and the most dominant desires of our followers. You would be amused to hear how often those desires can only be fulfilled by the removal of some living obstacle, or how willing my clients are to pay very large sums for the fruition of their hopes. Mrs. White, for instance, will have to pay thirty thousand pounds when she succeeds to the Moreland half million to-night. Of course, she will tell herself that she never meant *that*. . . . Mr. Curlew paid a rather smaller sum quite cheerfully when the obstacle to the prosperity of his store was taken away. I forget for the moment the name of my client who succeeded to the position of chief Whip on the death of Alfred Moore. I know he was a comparatively poor man, who could afford a bare fifteen hundred. Lord Drool contributed a far larger sum on his succession to the Woolmouth title and property; and the Harley Street specialist who is getting Sir William Newton's work regards himself as amply recompensed for a somewhat lavish expenditure."

Much that Clay had darkly suspected without possibility of proof was being confirmed with a sinister clarity.

"In return for these fees, which I admit were considerable, the service I gave was of the very highest quality. In the first place the person who profited by a convenient demise was spared any pang of conscience by the accidental appearance of the fatality. At the worst some supernatural agency, who had taken too seriously a word lightly spoken, was to blame. Another point which I featured was the invariable provision of a cast-iron alibi. In no single instance of the tragedies that I have engineered has the breath of suspicion tarnished the reputation of the profiting party."

Clay felt no wonder that this genius in crime had successfully defied the comparatively straightforward approach of Heppel and his colleagues. Again the scientist seemed to read his thoughts.

"In dealing with the police I had one very strong card. There was never any apparent motive to connect me or my religious organization with the crimes. When I speak of my organization you must not suppose that even the higher ranks in the New Search movement had any knowledge of my identity or of the real nature of my activities. When I employed New Seekers, I gave each so small a part in staging an accident that no individual member could see the whole pattern. To take an instance, the blameless maiden lady who keeps bees near Winchester would be horrified to learn that the instructions she received to plant queen wasps in the garden at Longbarrow had any connection with the consequent

death of Sir Robert Bynion. But his purchase of cyanide to combat the broods provided the apparent instrument of his decease."

His words solved an enigma that had puzzled Clay. So that was how the murderer had known the poison was in the house!

"Even the late Brother Cosimo"—the cripple blew his nose—"did not know who the Leader was or what were his real interests. Our interviews were staged in the Place of Whispers. But Cosimo came to know too much. He had to receive the Anathoth payments. I was not sorry when the third plan that you forced me to contrive to secure Mrs. White her inheritance called for the sacrifice of his life. Any suspicion that might have settled on New Search would, I reasoned, be lifted by the death of its figurehead. Only the temporary escape of Miss Hope marred the perfect success of one of the neatest of my schemes."

He leaned back in his chair and savoured the pleasure of memory.

"Your researches in the crypt"—his voice was patronizing—"will no doubt have shown you that the lake lights were controlled by the organ stops. When I heard the car in the distance I pulled out the *vox cœlestis*. When poor Cosimo began to scream I pushed home the stop, and the lights reverted to their usual appearance."

His smile of pride suggested that the contrivance of the murder of his friend stood near his heart.

"Without vanity"—his tone was complacent—"I flatter myself that I have found uses for the organ of which St. Cecilia never dreamed. You may remember an occasion when the garage doors closed mysteriously behind you. You may even remember that I was playing a Bach Magnificat. Anyone with a smattering of scientific knowledge can harness the waves of sound to perform small actions like those of opening and shutting a door. A distinguished professor of my acquaintance has only to touch his Klaxon horn for his front gates to swing open. The right note played on the sanctuary organ sets in action a simple mechanism that I have fitted to the garage door. The sound wave makes a stretched piano wire vibrate until it touches a metal ring through which it runs. The metal makes a contact. An electric magnet does the rest."

Clay closed his eyes to register contempt of scientific detail. The soft voice persisted.

"On another occasion a similar mechanism, tuned to a different note and concealed in the base of the statue of *Unconscious Cerebration*, upset the precarious equilibrium of that masterpiece. You probably failed to notice that, when the window of the gallery is open, the chair in front of the Monet is in sight of the organ loft."

Wounded vanity drove apprehension momentarily out of the painter's mind. It was maddening that the drug deprived him of the pleasure of telling his tormentor that he had solved the mysteries of the lake

and the cyanide murders. That the coincidence of the organ music with the two attempts on Hope's life had drawn his attention to the personality of the organist. That he had seen murder written on the thin protruding lips and in the ears set too low down and too far back. That he had solved the meaning of Anathoth and divined the source of the riches of New Search. That the scientist's permanent residence at the Priory, which was so patently the appanage of the cult, had suggested his identity with the unseen Leader, and that once the mystery of the wireless set in the Place of Whispers was solved . . .

But the man he had been on the point of unmasking had not finished.

"My infirmity," he was saying, "compelled me to rely on the assistance of others in the matters of detail—laying and removing the wires between organ and wherry and so forth. There I had the unintelligent coöperation of a half-witted labourer whose brain is too stunted to understand the uses he has been serving."

Clay remembered the head of the idiot he had found digging a trench by the side of the drive. Wentworth's assistants were worthy of him.

"Nurse Lasken," the cripple continued, "has been very helpful. Any temptation Madge might feel to betray my confidence is met by her knowledge that I would instantly lodge with Scotland Yard documentary proof of her share in a certain notorious operation on the wife of a cabinet minister. When you

remember how women fight for their necks, you will admit that the weak link in the chain is pretty strong."

The old man's hand travelled to his waistcoat pocket. He stared at an old-fashioned watch.

"So late!" he remarked. "I am afraid you will not have time to hear even the most summary account of my procedure in the forty odd cases which have terminated in a happy fatality and have brought in something over half a million pounds. I may perhaps mention that an intelligent use of ethyl chloride, a liquid which vaporizes at a low temperature with an effect like that of chloroform, has helped me on several occasions. You had an experience of its action on Hartfordbridge Flats. A specially prepared packet had been fixed to your car under the floor boards and above the exhaust pipe. The increasing heat melted the waxed outer wrappings. By the time the core which contained the ethyl chloride was reached and the vapour released by the temperature, the fitment was ready to drop off. If all had gone well, when the wreckage of your car came to be examined, no trace would have been found of the fatal packet. But your precaution of lowering the top reduced the stupefying action of the drug and gave you time to pull up."

He slipped his watch into his pocket and stretched his arm toward the further of the two hypodermic syringes that lay on the sofa.

"I expect," he said with his soft laugh, "that already the effect of your small dose of curare has begun to wear off. No doubt you are nursing the

strength that is flowing back into your limbs. I assure you, Mr. Clay, you underrate me. I have no wish to expose myself, cripple that I am, to your violence."

He picked up the syringe which held, Clay knew, cocaine. Clay felt the stab of the needle with a delight that he could barely hide. His shot in the dark had hit the target. By disarranging the order of the hypodermics, he had secured a comparatively harmless injection. If only the old dose would wear off!

"There, Mr. Clay!" the scientist was saying. "The curare will keep you immobile for another hour. Before that time is up, the hand of death will have conferred a more permanent immobility."

The wheel chair trundled out of sight. Clay summoned every fraction of his power of movement, which was, as Wentworth guessed, returning, and moved his head. He saw the old man manipulate the first volume of a work on psychotherapy and replace the two syringes in the recess that opened.

"I hope I have not bored you," apologized John Wentworth. "I assure you that it has given me a very real pleasure to explain my system to so good a listener. And now for an even more delightful hour with Miss Hope!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

Clay Calling

SUPERINTENDENT HEPPEL looked at Sergeant Biggin and remarked that he was blowed.

"Might be the Vanishing Lady on the Halls!" was the sergeant's comment. "First of all Miss Hope, then, while we were looking at those flower beds, Mr. Clay!"

Claud Bynion groaned.

"What can have happened? Can't you do something?"

Curlew pointed out that they had searched every bedroom and living room in the Priory.

"Mr. Clay can usually look after himself," said Heppel hopefully.

As he spoke, a neat white figure rustled up to the little group that was standing in the hall.

"Which of you gentlemen is Superintendent Heppel?" asked Miss Lasken demurely.

Heppel accepted the folded paper she offered. He took some time to read so short a note.

"Thank you!" he said at last. "There isn't any answer."

The young woman flashed him a brilliant smile with eyes and teeth. With her sick-room tread she vanished through the green baize door that led to the service quarters.

Heppel whispered in his assistant's ear.

"There's something funny. Keep her in sight."

Sergeant Biggin lounged off in the direction the girl had taken. He was the picture of aimlessness.

"What's funny?" Bynion had overheard. Heppel handed him the note.

A sigh of relief followed perusal.

"Thank God, that's all right. I had been imagining the most dreadful things." His brow darkened. "I wish she wasn't with that unreliable chap Clay!"

"I wish I was sure she was!" murmured Heppel.

Claud was gloomily positive. There was the note. What could be wrong?

"The date!" said the detective simply.

The young man reexamined the scribble.

"You'd expect a ruddy artist not to know the date!" he said contemptuously.

"You'd never expect Mr. Clay to put a date at all!" retorted Heppel. "Why did he take such trouble to write the *wrong* day of the month on a few lines that didn't need dating?"

He wrinkled his forehead over the scrap of paper. On the back of an envelope he copied some of the words. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. His pencil

ran down the letter. A few seconds later it was back in Bynion's hand with certain words underlined.

13 Oct:

DEAR HEPPEL

I have found Miss Moreland and I am quite sure she ought to be kept hidden somewhere safe and where it may be possible: under existing circs: to change ground whenever necessary. Therefore with Mr. Wentworth's help am taking her to town.

Haste,

LUCIEN CLAY.

"'October one three,'" commented the superintendent. "The *first* word of the first line, the *third* word of the next, and so on!"

With amazement in his voice Curlew read over Bynion's shoulder the message Clay had concealed.

I am hidden underground help haste.

"Lucien Clay does not ask for help," said Heppel gravely, "unless it is needed!"

He started at a trot down the drive. Claud and Curlew followed.

"Where are you going?"

"The crypt is underground!" panted the little detective.

That statement was true enough, but for twenty minutes they searched without finding any door or passage that might lead to Clay's place of confine-

ment. From cell to vault, round pillar and buttress they crept. At the end of every exploration their hands came in contact with the dank surfaces of stone walls.

Suddenly Heppel caught Bynion by the wrist and pulled him into a recess.

"Look!" he breathed in his ear.

At the far end of the crypt a parabola of light flickered for an instant on the floor. It vanished, but straining his ears Heppel could hear the scrape of an iron heel on the stone. He held his breath and cursed inwardly at his companions, who seemed to fidget and sniff like school children. Again the light flashed—nearer. Heppel was in doubt whether to wait for the crypt dweller or to make a dash for the torch. With all the self-control he could muster, he waited.

A minute later a foot slipped on a damp stone a yard away. Out came the automatic.

"Stand there!" the detective cried. "Don't move. I've got a gun!"

"For heaven's sake, Mr. Heppel, sir, don't!" came the voice of Sergeant Biggin.

Heppel swore. A vice to which he was not prone.

"What the devil are you doing here, Sergeant?" he asked.

Biggin switched on his lamp and gave an account of his actions. He had followed Nurse Lasken to the manageress's quarters, through the deserted staff room, and out by a back door. Shadowing her had not been easy, as his quarry kept looking back. She

had run across the lawn that divided priory from chapel. Biggin, hurrying after, saw the glimmer of her white dress whisking through a narrow doorway.

"I followed the woman," said the sergeant, "down the spiral stair. I could hear her high-heeled shoes tapping on the stone. She was not far ahead. I heard her pace quicken as she reached level ground. I hurried on. Her steps stopped. She had heard me, I supposed, and was standing listening. I stopped too. For five minutes I waited. Then I used my torch. I was in the burial place. Except for coffins it was empty. The nurse had vanished at arm's length, like the other two!"

Heppel took off his bowler hat to scratch his bald head.

"We'd better start at the top of the spiral stair," he decided.

They made their way to the open. The fresh air smelt good after the odour of dust and decay that permeated the crypt. With reluctance they passed from the clean, rain-washed night through the chapel door into the sinister darkness of the sanctuary. The beams of their flash lamps made impotent inroads.

From somewhere in front of them came a high cough.

"Who's that?" jerked Heppel.

No answer. Four beams of light wavered over pillar, arch, and pavement. A hundred men with coughs might have lurked unseen in the shadow of the aisles.

"The noise came from the Place of Whispers!" muttered Bynion.

The four men, flashing their lights, advanced in a row to the foot of the Crystal Stair. By common consent they paused. No one likes an unseen watcher. Curlew dropped a little behind the others. The superintendent fingered his revolver.

He set his foot on the bottom step. He fancied he heard difficult breathing at the top. He switched his beam on the Place of Whispers. The fight with Bynion had torn down the curtains. The light rested on the vase of lilies.

"Hell!" said a familiar voice. "How does this damn thing work?"

Superintendent Heppel jumped. Before he reached the top of the staircase the owner of the voice had mastered the intricacy of the switches.

"Lucien Clay addressing the British Isles!" called out the vase of lilies.

Three times it repeated the summons. Then:

"Will anyone in touch with Superintendent Heppel of the C. I. D., otherwise known as Mr. Wright of the ladies' underwear department, ask him to come on a matter of life and death to the Place of Whispers?"

"Clay!" cried Heppel to the vase of lilies.

The tone of raillery was dropped. Lucien's voice was weak and hurried.

"Send Biggin running for sixty foot of rope. Tell him to take it to Hope's cupboard. Wedge open the

door. Make fast the end of the line, and let the floor of the cupboard, which is a lift, lower him to the bottom of the shaft."

Heppel called out the instructions as they were given.

"Tell him that every second is important!"

The superintendent shouted the words after his subordinate as he reached the end of the aisle.

"Has he gone?" The voice was very anxious. "Are Bynion and Curlew with you? Send them to collect crowbars, sledgehammers, anything that will break down steel doors. Take them to Hope's bedroom."

Heppel gave the order.

"Now, listen!" commanded Clay's voice, and in a few words he exposed the atrocities that John Wentworth had perpetrated and was threatening.

"Behind the books is a steel door. I am a prisoner. But my muscles are working, and I've found the cupboard where he hid the syringes. On the side of the recess is a switchboard. Dozens of buttons and wires. One switch labelled 'Cathedral.' Another 'Sanctuary.' I pressed everything in sight and began to talk. Bit of luck you were there."

Heppel asked where the sadist had hidden Hope.

"We must find out," the vase of lilies said. "We'll save her in spite of hell!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

The Tank

HAD Lucien known, at the moment that he spoke to Heppel, Hope was some six feet above his head.

The descending floor of the cupboard had carried her to the half basement of the hotel, a level above the converted cellar where Clay was imprisoned.

At first the frightened girl, who had suddenly stepped from the warmth and security of a hotel bedroom into the silence and darkness of a secret shaft, did not dare to move. The solid ground might again yield under her feet. She cowered against the stone wall. If only Clay could tell her what to do! Even Sergeant Biggin would be a comfort. She did not dare to think of Claud. Was it into his hands that she had fallen? Her heart beat not quite unpleasurably. Then she remembered that her evening frock lay on the bed. All that hung between her and nudity was a few ounces' weight of lace and silk. She was in no state to put a young man in his place. Her heart beat faster. She must find something to throw over her shoulders. Even if only a curtain or an old sack. She would not look her best, but she told her-

self that she could manage Claud Bynion in anything—except cami-knickers.

Cautiously she left the protection of the wall. Her hands were extended in front of her. She hoped that they would touch nothing cold or wet. Suppose she fell into a well! She moved her feet an inch at a time. But the floor was dry and level, and her hands touched . . . nothing.

When she had moved three or four yards in as many minutes, a current of air caressed her cheek. Iron clanged behind her back. She could not suppress a cry, that was echoed by resonant walls. Surely a door had slammed? She turned in the darkness, and her hands sawed the air. A step took her to a barrier of steel, where there had been nothing before. She passed shrinking fingers over its smooth surface. She could find neither keyhole, nor handle, nor edges to give her purchase. Panic overwhelmed her, and her childish fists hammered at the sheet of steel until they hurt. Her breath came in sobs, and tears of fright ran down her cheeks. Why had she not stayed where she was safe and called up the shaft till Clay came to take her out? Now he would never find her. She would die of starvation or at the hands of men who had already tried to murder her. Her bruised fists beat on the pitiless metal. No answer but the echo of her drumming. She slid to the concrete floor.

Presently her sobbing ceased and she grew calmer. After all, why should not the door have shut by accident? A draught might have caught it. She could

hear no sound of any living agency. She was trembling a little as she raised herself and put out a hand to the left. Almost at once her fingers met something hard that gave as she pressed it. She recognized the consistency. It was wire netting, stretched like the boundary of a well-netted lawn-tennis court. She tried to the front. A surface smooth as glass met her. She turned. That was better. No netting yet. A few more paces and she had banged into a concrete wall. She felt her way along. No door. High up at arm's length a narrow ventilator, into whose slits she could barely push her fingers. She reached a corner, turned it and was back at the iron that had imprisoned her. She knew that she was trapped in a cage a few feet wide, a few yards long and—she raised her hand carefully above her head till it could just touch a glasslike surface—about six feet high.

She steadied her nerves. Panic must not swoop down again. She would not let her mind linger on what that cage might mean. She kept thought screwed to the immediate need of finding a covering for her body. She knelt on the concrete floor and swept it vainly with her hands. Not even a scratchy old sack. Her fingers encountered the grilled aperture of a small circular drain, flush with the floor. It might have been the waste pipe of a bath. Where was she? Netting, steel, glass, concrete, waste pipes? The air was warm, and in spite of her dishabille she felt no cold. That resonance she had noticed? Was she in a sort of underground bathroom? The word brought

terror in its train, with half-forgotten memory of the headline a nursemaid had let her see—"Sluts in a Bath!"

What were they going to do to her? They? Who? Not Claud!—with that nice smile, that quick temper, and that attractive broken nose! Claud would save her if only he knew where to look! And Lucien would know where to look. It seemed weeks since she had filled in the columns about marrying him. And now she might never decide. She was going to be some-
body's Bride in a Bath! Whose? One of those priests? She had always loathed them, though for Aunt Maria's sake she had not shown her thinking. Slutty, lunched, creeping. What was a Black Mass? Even in the darkness she shut her eyes not to see an illustration she had once glimpsed in a forbidden book. That was what priests did with you. . . .

She thrust the picture out of her mind. That sort of thing did not happen nowadays. She was being silly about priests. What was that sound? She stretched her ears. Nothing. There it was again in the corner! Quite close, wasn't it? A funny, rather horrible sound. Like a soft adhesive hand moving up and down the smooth barrier—a hand so soft that it seemed to squelch into the surface and then come away with a little plip. Then a strong, rattling rattle. Then squelch, and another plip. . . .

Hope buckled against the steel door. The sound stopped, and she blamed imagination. If only she had a light! Better to see anything, however ghastly, than

to imagine . . . She heard the sound again. *Slide, squelch, plop*. . . .

Hope covered her ears with her hands and gave scream after scream. . . .

A click, and a cold white light illuminated her prison. For a moment she was dazzled. With huge relief she saw old Mr. Wentworth's big round spectacles level with the floor she knelt on. She was saved. Her friends had found her. In a few minutes she would be back in her bedroom, with her clothes on, telling them all about her adventures. She would be quite a heroine.

But why didn't Mr. Wentworth say something? Why was he staring like that? He made her feel uncomfortable, especially as she was without her frock. She crossed her arms over her breasts.

In what a horrid way he looked at her! Almost as if he was amused. Why, he was laughing! Leaning back in his wheel chair and shaking with laughter. Indignantly she turned her eyes away.

Then she recognized where she was. She had been in this place before. With Mr. Wentworth too. It was his aquarium! Down in the basement of the hotel where he had shown her sea horses and the Girdle of Venus. But now, instead of looking at fish in glass tanks ranged at eye level, as she stood in the narrow concrete room, she was in a tank herself. Behind her was the steel door that had let her into the trap, and the concrete of the back wall. In front of her stretched a barrier of wire netting. Beyond

the netting the glass of the tank, through which she could see the head of Mr. Wentworth in his wheel chair. The old idiot was still laughing! Why did he not send for someone to take her out? There was Miss Lasken behind his chair. She made no move to help.

Hope averted her eyes. They fell on the plate glass that separated her from the next tank. And when she saw what had made the noise in the dark, she almost screamed again. With tentacles swaying in the water like fronds of a fleshy, animate plant, an octopus was creeping up the other side of the glass. She could see the double row of yellowish suckers pressed against the transparent surface. The sightless protruding eyes seemed to peer at her. The fumbling arms were feeling for her. . . .

She held down hysteria. After all, the glass was there. The thing could not touch her. Mr. Wentworth would have the steel door opened, and this nightmare would end.

She compelled herself to approach the wire netting and to give the scientist a tear-stained smile.

"Please help me out!" she called.

The old man signed to his attendant. Nurse Lasken pushed his chair nearer until he could lay his lips against the glass.

"Not yet!" he shouted. "Not yet! You don't know how pretty you look, my dear!"

Hope fought away fear. She gave a little giggle.

"Don't be silly! Take me out."

His shoulders worked with a laughter that was inaudible through the plate glass. She turned her appeal to the woman who stood behind him.

"Miss Lasken, *please!*"

Hope could hardly hear her answer.

"I can't. I've got to do what Mr. Wentworth says."

Her glance at the bent shoulders in front of her showed terror, hate, and a queer fascination. So might the damned look at the fiend who torments them.

Hope tried again.

"At least lend me something to put on."

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"What's the good?" she asked.

The three words turned Hope's heart to stone.

"What d'you mean?" she stammered.

Nurse Lasken made up her mind.

"I'll do the only thing for you I can!" she cried.

"At least I'll make it quick!"

She ran to the wall and began to turn a brass wheel. Her hands slipped in her haste. The glass partition stirred and a trickle of water spread on the concrete at Hope's feet.

Hope screamed.

"The water! The octopus! You'll let it in."

Her cries were drowned by the menacing voice of the cripple.

"Lasken! Shut that cock. Immediately!"

The woman stopped, like a performing animal

that has been shown the whip. Her eyes sought Hope's despairingly. Slowly her hand reversed the wheel. The trickle of water was stayed.

John Wentworth recovered his suavity.

"Really, Madge," his voice was soft again, "you forget yourself. That sensitive heart of yours nearly spoiled everything. The pleasure that lies before us must be savoured slowly. Your methods are so crude. Why let Miss Hope know that we intend to drown her, so—abruptly! That exquisite truth should have dawned slowly. She should have lingered in a delicious uncertainty. You really have been very stupid!"

The woman's mouth was sullen. She obeyed a sign to push Wentworth's chair nearer the stop cock. His eyes did not leave Hope's face as he reached for the wheel. Hope flung herself against the wire. If only she could smash the glass. The netting cut her arms.

"That's right!" commended the cripple. "There's always a chance. . . . Dear me, you're bleeding! What a pity to spoil those pretty clothes!"

The sight of blood brought Wentworth's disease to a paroxysm. His eyes were mad. A little saliva ran out of the corner of his mouth. Until a death had satiated him his mind and body had passed out of his control.

Hope did not know that she was dealing with a man whom the lust of cruelty had sent for the moment mad.

"You'll be hanged if you kill me," she panted. "Think!"

The maniac took his hand off the wheel. He assured her that he had given the point his earnest consideration. All could be satisfactorily arranged. Next day her body would be found in the lake. Her death would—rightly—be presumed to have been by drowning. With her, a second body would be discovered.

The cripple paused to let his words carry.

"The corpse of your friend, Mr. Lucien Clay."

Hope felt her knees weaken. Her last hope had been that somehow Lucien would save her.

"On it will be found a written statement to the effect that death seemed to you both the only issue to a guilty passion. That will satisfy the coroner's jury, don't you think?"

Hope looked wildly round the room. Was there no way to attract attention? Shutters fitted the high windows and left no chink. The massive door was locked and barred. It would have resisted a siege. She fell on her silken knees in the puddle and clasped her hands.

"Oh, please!" she cried. "You can't mean this. You can't!"

"If you knew," John Wentworth rubbed his hands, "how delicious you look!"

The nurse must be more merciful.

"I'm rich. I'll give all my money to you! Every penny! Only help me out!"

She saw the flame of cupidity in Lasken's eyes. A madder light lit Wentworth's.

"Don't be so commercial minded, Miss Hope," he protested. "There are certain moments that no money can buy."

Slowly he raised his hand to the wheel. Slowly he began to turn it. The partition lifted half an inch and into Hope's tank the water began to flood.

But now that death stared her in the face, the girl kept her head. She judged the depth of water in the further tank—that it was about three parts full. By the time the water had found its own level in her section, it would reach no higher than her waist. Even if the tank filled as high as the mark on the glass, which showed the usual level, her head and shoulders would still emerge. Surely the old man was only trying to frighten her with a cruel, abominable joke. Then she remembered the octopus. . . .

The glass partition lifted as the brass wheel revolved. Soon the opening would be wide enough for the creature to squeeze through. Already, with hideous intelligence, it had headed downward, and the suckers that clung to the glass were being glutinously detached.

What would the thing do to her? The eight arms moved like snakes. Were they poisonous? Or would they strangle her? Those vague drifting tentacles did not look very strong. But each was some three feet long, and wrapped round her limbs . . . Oh, how loathsome the cold yellow suckers would feel on

her flesh! . . . Would they not drag her under water?

Already the beast was halfway down the glass, and already the water was over her ankles. The water was tepid and smelt stale and fishy. The steel door which had trapped her was cold and slippery against her bare back.

She looked to Wentworth, hoping against hope that he would relent. There was no mercy in the weak eyes that the spectacles magnified. His thin lips were smiling.

The water reached her knees. She felt the suck as it swirled through the ever-widening aperture. The octopus was pressing his bag of a body against the slit. Two arms had floated through and fluctuated in an uncertain effort to fix their grip on the concrete floor. The suckers fastened, and the tentacles pulled the body behind them till it bulged obscenely on the rim of the glass. The shape distorted and, like an hour glass, the creature eased itself through the opening.

Hope bit back her screams. That devil wanted her to scream. The octopus couldn't kill her. It wasn't big or strong enough. All she had to do was to fight it off so that it did not drag her under the water, which already washed against her thighs. Think of those waving, snakelike tentacles clinging to her body! She would feel the suckers through her wet clothes. . . . The octopus advanced, drifting vaguely through the water, eight arms asprawl, aimless in motion, but terribly purposeful in intention. . . . The water

had reached her waist. It was nearly level in the two tanks. The octopus was a yard away. She could not move. She shut her eyes. . . .

What was that distant noise of hammering? It was muffled, remote. Was someone coming to save her?

Wentworth had heard. Reluctantly he took his eyes off his victim. He whispered to the nurse. She went to the door of the narrow room and pulled back the bolts. The cripple manœuvred his chair and fastened bar and lock behind her. The sound of battering ceased. Hope's heart sank. Something cold and fleshy touched her foot. She huddled back into the corner. Another tentacle touched her knee. She dashed it away. But three more fastened round her legs. She kicked wildly. She heard the cripple laugh. The thing was not very powerful, it sickened more than menaced her. That soft, enveloping touch! She fought to disengage it.

She heard the creak of the wheel chair in motion. She took her eyes off the octopus and was rewarded by a slimy caress on her bosom.

But now she hardly cared, for Wentworth was busy with another stop cock. She could hear the gurgle of a flowing pipe. . . . The water began to rise above her waist.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Too Late?

THE rescue party stumbled into a passage feebly lighted by electricity. The scattered books, smashed shelves, and twisted steel showed where the sledge hammer in Bynion's powerful hands had completed the work that Heppel's crowbar had begun. Their fear was lest the noise that inevitably accompanied their onslaught on the bookcase door had given the alarm and precipitated the tragedy. Clay's face was very white and his eyes tormented. His limbs moved in jerks. The detective urged him to leave the search to his rescuers.

Clay shook his matted head.

"You don't know," he pronounced carefully, "what that fiend is like. I must find her."

The passage led steeply uphill. Clay pointed to a handrail along the wall.

"To help with the wheel chair!" was his comment.

They came to a point where the passage divided and ran level to right and to left.

"Which way, sir?" asked Biggin.

Heppel paused to get his orientation.

"That branch," he pointed, "leads in the direction of the chapel. The other toward the Priory. We must split up."

Clay laid an uncertain hand on his wrist.

"Listen!" he said. "Someone running!"

They were silent. A light step echoed distantly along the branch that led toward the sanctuary. Heppel broke into a run. Clay shambled after.

A bend in the narrow, airless corridor showed the pursuers a flutter of white.

"Nurse Lasken!" gasped Clay.

She must have passed a switch for, as he spoke, the dim light of the passage was extinguished. The rescue party pounded on in the dark.

"She'll slip us again!" panted Biggin.

But they were gaining on the fleeing footsteps. Heppel flashed his torch. The light fell on the trim figure of the nurse thirty yards ahead.

"Stop!" he called. "I'll shoot!"

The tap of her feet was silenced. She had obeyed the summons. The beam of the torch showed that she had run into a trap. Beyond her the wall was blank.

"Look out!" cried Clay. "It's moving!"

The solid stone seemed to pivot.

"She's done us!" howled Claud.

Heppel's revolver answered. A reverberation in a confined space, the reddish flash, the smell of cordite, and the shriek of a ricocheting bullet were too much for Nurse Lasken's nerve. She fled into the crypt,

leaving the secret door, that separated the underground passage from the burial vault, ajar. Her pursuers poured through the opening.

In the dark Claud barged into the coffin that held accumulators. It crashed to the ground. Someone shone his torch.

"Don't shoot her!" cried Clay at the sight of Heppel's levelled pistol. "We need her alive."

Nurse Lasken was halfway up the spiral flight that led from the vault to the Place of Whispers when the hunters closed. There was a click in the darkness as Biggin snapped the handcuffs on her wrist. She struggled vainly.

"Take her to the light!" said Clay. His voice was hard.

They dragged her to the top of the stairs and into a little oratory behind the Place of Whispers. On an altar stood two candles. Tom Curlew lighted them. Their light fell on the defiant eyes of the manacled woman.

Clay motioned to his companions to stand aside. He slouched toward Nurse Lasken until his beard brushed her cheek.

"Where is Hope Moreland?" he said slowly.

"How should I know?" she parried.

Clay repeated his question.

"Look for her and find her!"

"There's a quicker way." His words were heavy with meaning. "You won't tell me?"

The nurse shook her head obstinately.

Clay's eyes did not leave her face. He held out a trembling hand to Heppel.

"Your revolver!" The syllables fell like pebbles down a bottomless well.

Hypnotized, the detective handed him the automatic. Clay raised it slowly and pressed its muzzle against the woman's cheek bone.

"For the last time, Lasken, where is Hope Moreland?"

Heppel's voice broke in.

"You can't, Mr. Clay. It is murder!"

Lucien's gaze never left the spot of rouge that the barrel touched.

"Do you think I wouldn't hang—to save her?"

Nurse Lasken heard the ring of sincerity in his voice. She saw the crooked finger closing on the trigger.

"Stop!" she cried. "I'll tell you."

Clay kept the revolver against her cheek bone.

"Go on!"

"Swear you won't shoot me if I tell you where she is and how to get there!"

Clay promised.

"She's up to her neck in water in the tank. The water is pouring in. You'll be three minutes running down the passage to the aquarium and half an hour battering in the door. In five minutes from now she's dead!"

The woman burst into hysterical laughter.

Bynion snatched up his sledge hammer.

"I'll smash the door to atoms!" he vowed.

"You'll need dynamite!" the woman shouted in her spasm. But already Claud was out of sight and clattering down the spiral stair. Tom Curlew went after him.

"We must do what we can," said Heppel hopelessly.

"Don't talk! Don't talk!" Clay screamed at him. His shaking hands covered his eyes and his fingers were in his ears. "I must think—think. There must be a way. Oh, if only I could think!"

There was a moment of silence. The candles flickered in the draught that blew through the ruined walls. Long, ghostly shadows flapped their wings. Even the sound of the woman's hysterics had stopped. At last Clay shot a question at her. It was so pointless that Heppel wondered if the strain and the drugs had not turned his brain.

"How full," he asked the nurse, "does Wentworth keep his tanks?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"About three quarters full."

"That would be how high?"

"Say four foot six. The tanks are six foot deep."

Clay jerked a question at Heppel.

"How tall is Hope? Five foot seven or eight?"

He did not wait for an answer but was scrambling up the ladder that led to the organ loft. Heppel followed. He feared that his friend might fling himself from the height.

He caught him at the top.

"My dear friend," he began, "I know what you must be suffering. Be brave, though. We can only pray——"

Clay sat down on the organ bench.

"Prayer?" he asked wildly. "What about a voluntary for a start?"

His forefinger switched on the electric motor that worked the bellows, and his other hand pulled at the stops. Then the great organ pealed its deepest note.

CHAPTER XXXIX

"Arte Perire Sua"

BEFORE now, as Nurse Lasken had said, the water had reached Hope's throat. Wentworth's remorseless hand on the stop cock controlled the flow. He feasted his eyes on the terror of death that was written on the Madonna face. The agony of drowning by inches had conquered her fear of the octopus, whose obscene tentacles wreathed round the slim body that wet silk draped with transparency.

The water rose on her throat. She stood on the points of her toes and for a moment counteracted its steady gain. But soon its lukewarm hand was caressing her chin. Her fingers twisted into the wire netting and again she hoisted herself a little way above the ever-rising tide. The wire cut her tender hands, but love of life drove her higher. Her head was stopped by the glass roof of the tank. There was nothing more to do. Again the water lapped her chin. Three inches more and she would be drowned.

She tried a last appeal. Soon speech would be stopped.

"Let me off!" she pleaded through the glass. "Let

me off! I'll do anything you want. I don't want to die yet! I don't want to die!"

John Wentworth's only answer was an ecstatic smile. He gave the tap a final turn.

A muffled blow echoed on the door of the narrow room. Claud Bynion's voice shouted her name.

"Here!" she screamed. "Here! Help me! Oh, quick!"

The blows redoubled. The door was built like a safe. It did not quiver.

The cripple laughed madly.

"This room will keep out an army!" he boasted. "Your friend will be here to-morrow, if he's lucky. You will be dead in two minutes."

"Claud!" she called. "Be quick! Be quick!"

She shook the wire. If only she could reach the glass which seemed to bulge under the great weight of the water! But the netting was strong and she was strengthless. The octopus tightened its embrace as if protesting against her lack of self-restraint.

"Claud! Cl——!"

The water covered her mouth. She tilted her head to raise her nostrils half an inch above the surface. A tentacle came to anchor on her lips.

"Take your last breath!" shouted Wentworth and worked his chair close to the glass, the better to see her death struggle.

What was that drone that filled her ears? Was she drowning, and were her eardrums bursting? The tank seemed to vibrate. The throb of sound settled

into regular pulsations. Was that death? Rhythm and ordered waves? It sounded like the grave note of a great organ. . . .

The water was in her nostrils.

Crack! She turned her dying eyes to the door. Had Claud broken in? The steel gave no sign of yielding. But across the plate-glass top of the tank ran a silver line. The line moved. It spread from corner to corner. It widened. It ran over to the front of the tank. A louder crack and a great force hurled her against the wire and held her there. The water fell away from her like an immeasurably heavy cloak. She filled her lungs, as the contents of the tank swirled past her, down into the narrow room. . . . The green wave overwhelmed Wentworth where he sat in his paralysis. Its violence struck him to the ground. The narrow room became a channel of swirling water. He lay on his back under the water, his head rolling from side to side. The overset chair pinned him down. His fingers clutched at the smooth surface of the walls, and his nails broke in unavailing effort to drag his paralyzed trunk above the water. . . . Oily bubbles rose to the surface. . . .

From the platform above, where once had stood the tank, Hope looked on in horror. A dreadful bubbling noise was audible through the drone of the great organ note that Clay still held in the chapel. He did not know how long the vibrations would take to crack the glass top of the tank, which they shook like a diaphragm. Once the top was cracked, he had

guessed that the front, already overstrained by the unusual height of the water, would burst.

The gurgling noise ceased. On the face of the dead man squatted the shapeless body of the octopus. . . .

Hope slid to the concrete. She had fainted.

CHAPTER XL

“Hail Wedded Love . . . Sole Propriety!”

—*Milton.*

THE daffodils of Hyde Park were tossing their heads in defiance of an April breeze. Or else they were bowing with mock deference to ephemeral man and his fugitive religions—for neither come up the same with every spring.

Through the railings of the Park, the daffodils could see a hoarding that half-hid the façade of the New Search cathedral. Already the nave was demolished, and before many weeks had passed a block of flats, more luxurious and more hideous than the Grosvenor House pile, would be reared on the recently sacred site.

Although the full facts had never been published, New Search had died with its founder. Scandal blossomed and rumour flourished, and every devotee hastened to disassociate himself from the discredited cult. The death of John Wentworth closed forever the doors of bronze.

True to the instinct that has made England what she is, the terrible story was hushed up. At the inquest on the scientist, a coroner's verdict of “Accidental

Death" was recorded. The epitaph was ironically appropriate to the man who had been the cause of so many deaths by apparent accident.

Hope was too ill to give evidence. The finding of the body was described by Claud Bynion, who with Curlew's aid had eventually forced the massive door of the aquarium. A glance had told him that Wentworth was drowned. He carried the inanimate girl to the fire that Biggin had lighted.

At the inquest no mention was made of Clay's organ solo, which had so dramatically sounded death to the cripple and salvation to Hope. The case of Nurse Lasken was submitted to the Public Prosecutor, who decided that no jury would convict in view of the hearsay nature of the evidence. This opinion was hailed with delight by the many influential persons who had confessed the desire nearest to their hearts during their five minutes in the Place of Whispers. At the moment Nurse Lasken is confined in a mental institute. On coming on, her good looks and her notoriety will no doubt secure her engagement on the music hall stage or an even more profitable incursion into holy matrimony.

Something of the latter sort seemed to be in progress this spring day in Park Lane under the amused eyes of the daffodils.

A particularly shiny limousine had drawn up outside a newly painted house which oozed striped awnings and red carpet. The chauffeur on the box and the footman by his side shimmered with white

favours. The daffodils had raised their heads too late to see the faces of the pair that had stepped out arm in arm, but they did not miss the succession of chattering girls in white satin whom fresh cars deposited. Top hats, well-creased trousers, fur coats, silk stockings streamed up the red carpet.

At the top of the marble staircase that swept its easy way from hall to drawing room stood a graceful figure in white. The wide skirt with its flavour of Victorianism, the tight posy of white violets nestling amid silver leaves, the grave, remembering eyes, the pure forehead, would have told any stranger ascending the broad steps that he was on his way to touch the cool fingers of the great heiress to whom had happened, it was whispered, such terrible adventures.

Whatever the truth of those rumours, her poise was perfect. If ever her hand tired, she seemed to draw strength from the remarkable personage who stood by her side.

A pair of tight sponge-bag trousers covered a pair of bony legs. Total immersion or the growth of their owner had raised the ragged hems several inches above the top of a pair of cracked patent leather boots. A frock coat hung loosely on an emaciated body. The coat's formality was contradicted by a cricket shirt, whose opening at the throat was screened by a flowing bow with spots the size of a shilling. Above the tie bristled a vermilion beard. Some attempt had been made by inexpert hands, wielding blunt clippers, to subdue its luxuriance. The

result would have done more credit to a moth than to a barber. On his fingers Lucien Clay balanced a top hat that no provincial conjuror on a third-rate circuit would have looked at. A large gardenia had been pinned in his buttonhole. His blue eyes gave the flower an occasional look of loathing.

He bent his head toward the girl by his side.

"Do you know, my dear," he whispered, "I think I'll have a look at the champagne!"

The girl shook hands with four dowagers in quick succession.

"All right, Lucien!" She hesitated. "Don't look too long!"

He left her side and elbowed his way through the double doors. Every eye turned, not unnaturally, in his direction.

Before he could reach the long tables he found his way barred by Aunt Mina. A new shade of powder made her look younger.

"I hope the dear girl will be wildly happy," she began. "I'm sure she deserves the very best, after all she went through! She must have dozens of children—though I suppose I oughtn't to say this to you. She will adore them. And then no one can say those horrible things about me, that I'm the heir to her fortune and want to succeed her. Not that any of my friends believed that for a moment. I'm sure that you, Lucien . . ."

The press of the crowd, to Clay's relief, swept him away from the voluble lady and nearer the table.

His fingers had just fastened round the gold-papared neck of a bottle when an enormous hand slapped his back. Only his veneration for wine saved the bottle.

"My dear Lucien!" shouted Claud Bynion. "The happiest day of my life! And I owe it all to you."

He seized Clay's free hand and shook it vigorously.

"If you hadn't thought of that organ business the poor darling would have been dead before I reached her. I can't think calmly of that swine, dead though he is. But I suppose I owe him something. If Hope hadn't been kept on her back all these weeks I'd never have had time to persuade her to say 'yes.' Do you know, Lucien, I was actually jealous of you once."

Clay asked the bridegroom if he had not better return to the head of the stairs.

"I must see about the cake," answered Claud. "We want you there when it's cut."

The painter realized that he must postpone his intentions on the Clicquot.

"I'm on my way to look at the presents," he alleged.

With an air elaborately accidental, Sergeant Biggin was established in front of a glass case of jewellery.

"Very honest-looking lot here to-day," was his greeting. "I doubt there'll be much for me to do."

"A suspicious character by the door examining that dressing case," hinted Lucien.

Sergeant Biggin raised his eyes.

"But that's the Bishop of Blackpool!"

"Very likely. I was looking at his face, not his gaiters."

Clay strolled on until he stood before the portrait he had given Hope as a wedding present. She had asked him when he would have time to finish.

He had shaken his head.

"Not this one. When you've been married a few years I'll have another shot."

He stood staring at the unfinished picture.

"There's the best thing I've ever done!" he murmured. That was true. All he had left of ideals had gone to its painting. He sighed. "The best things in life are usually the most incomplete."

He felt a quiet hand on his arm.

"That's very lovely, Mr. Clay," said the voice of Superintendent Heppel. "If possible more lovely than the original."

"Aren't dreams, always?" asked Lucien.

His voice was indistinct.

"I wonder," said Heppel gently, "you never thought of asking her to marry you."

Clay laughed. There was little amusement in the sound. "She'd have made me give up brandy!" he jeered. Out of his breast pocket he pulled a paper, which had been folded, read, and rubbed, until the pencil marks were no longer clear. A professional

instinct led Heppel to look over his friend's shoulder at the sheet. It had been ruled into two columns. He was able to read the large letters that ended the page.

"If he wants it, I will marry Lucien."

Clay tore the grubby relic in half and in half, until all that was left was a handful of paper snow. He watched the flakes flutter down from the open window to the street.

Then he answered Heppel's question.

"It didn't seem right to want," he said quietly.

THE END

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